Magnus Wins With

Black

Zenon Franco

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Author: Zenon Franco Ocampos

Typesetting by Andrei Elkov (www.elkov.ru)

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Introduction

This second volume of the games of world champion Magnus Carlsen contains 30 of his most instructive wins from 2006 to 2020 as Black. It also follows the “move by move” format with exercises and questions, which is a good way to train.

The main difference between these games and those in the previous book is that fewer of them are attacking games than when Carlsen plays White. This should not come as a surprise, because White has more chances to dictate the game scenario. Nevertheless, there are still some examples in this volume where Carlsen wins by attack. Another important difference is that there are more endings in this volume, which is also understandable.

What remains unchanged is that the fights are always intense. Carlsen never stops trying to win the game, no matter if, objectively, his chances are small. There are several examples where, at some point, his opponents collapse, unable to withstand the tension that Carlsen maintains in the game.

I also try to emphasise the practical, “human” side of the battle. That is very important for understanding the game, sometimes more relevant than the opinion of the computer.

It is interesting what Carlsen says about this:

“Obviously you have to play well, you have to play good moves, but I think when looking at the games with computers it’s hard to understand what’s actually going on in the minds of the players. When I look at chess I try to look as little as possible with the computer, because I know that once we get past the preparation phase then it’s not really relevant what the computer says and it’s more about psychology and everything.”

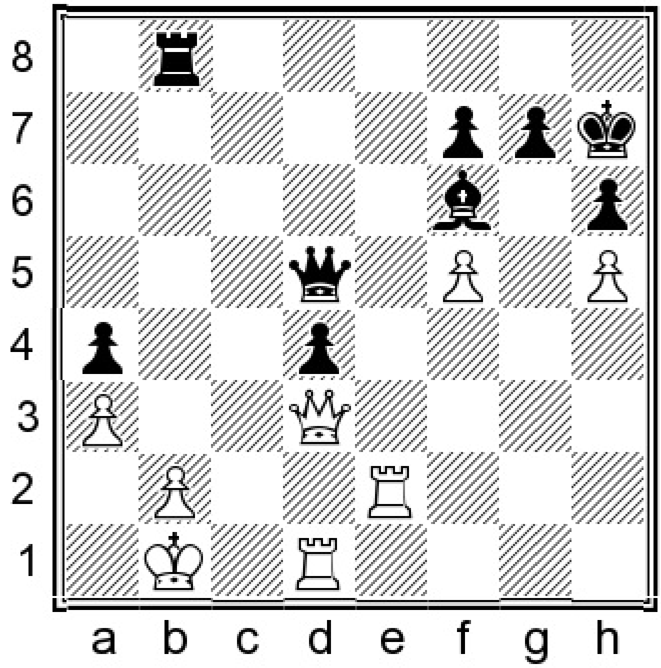
He talked later specifically about the Sveshnikov Variation of the Sicilian, but these comments are valid for lots of structures and positions: “This particular opening is a special case. If you turn on the computer early on it will say that White is better, but it doesn’t say whether the position is easier to play for White or Black. Once he got out of the opening then it feels like, yeah, he’s a pawn up, but it feels like the stakes are kind of higher for him. I’m going for mate, and he has to survive. Yeah, I think psychology is definitely a huge part of the game. It’s one of the reasons why this particular line is doing well.” As always, I have tried to include the opinion of the main protagonists, above all Carlsen and then his opponents, as well as of Peter Heine Nielsen.

Regarding your task, I think that there is no reason to be upset if you don’t manage to “guess” a large number of moves. It is really more important to think about them as deeply as possible, and then compare your thoughts with the explanations given. This will become very useful for your chess skills.

Magnus Carlsen continued to try new openings and defences during the 2020 pandemic. He played the Philidor Defence for the second time in his life at the St. Louis Rapid and Blitz 2020, after playing it against Guseinov in a blitz tournament in 2017.

Leinier Dominguez Perez – Magnus Carlsen

St. Louis Rapid and Blitz chess24.com (5), 16.09.2020



White to play

Carlsen has sacrificed an exchange for a pawn and obtained the better chances. A lot of things have happened and now the position is rather unpleasant for White, but it’s still unclear.

White has weak pawns on h5 and f5, but as long as Black’s bishop remains inactive White’s position should be tenable. However, that would only have held true with a longer time control...

37.♕e4?

White wants to play 38.♖d3, with his queen very well situated on e4, but the absence of a blockader will be punished.

37...♖xb2+!

The bishop enters the game, and, combined with the d-pawn, makes the queen attack irresistible.

38.♔xb2 d3+ 39.♔c1 ♕c5+ 40.♔d2 ♕c2+ 41.♔e1 ♗h4+!

0–1

I enjoyed writing this book: looking deeper into the games of Magnus Carlsen is always a great pleasure. I hope you like it too, and it will make me happy if it helps you to understand better our mutual passion, chess, from the games of one of the greatest chess players in history.

Dedicated to Yudania.

GM Zenon Franco Ocampos
Ponteareas, September 2020

Show in Text Mode

30 Black Wins

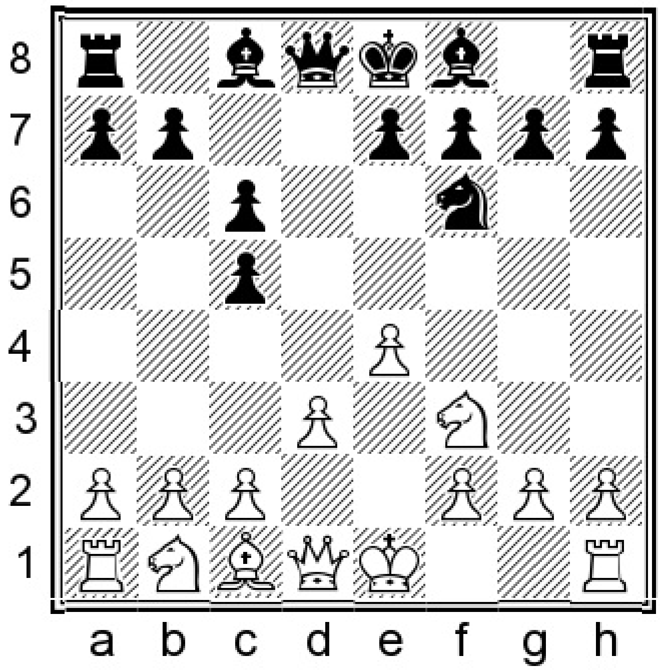
Game 1

Alexander Morozevich – Magnus Carlsen

Sicilian Defence [B30]

Biel (7), 31.07.2006

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 ♘f6 4.♗xc6 dxc6 5.d3



5...♘d7

Question: This is not usual, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: You are right, 5...♗g4 is more popular. Carlsen explained that neither this move nor 3...♘f6 were the most common choices. He was only 16 but he showed high self-confidence when he added "... but I had taken a look at them and I must say that on the whole I like Black's position."

6.♗f4

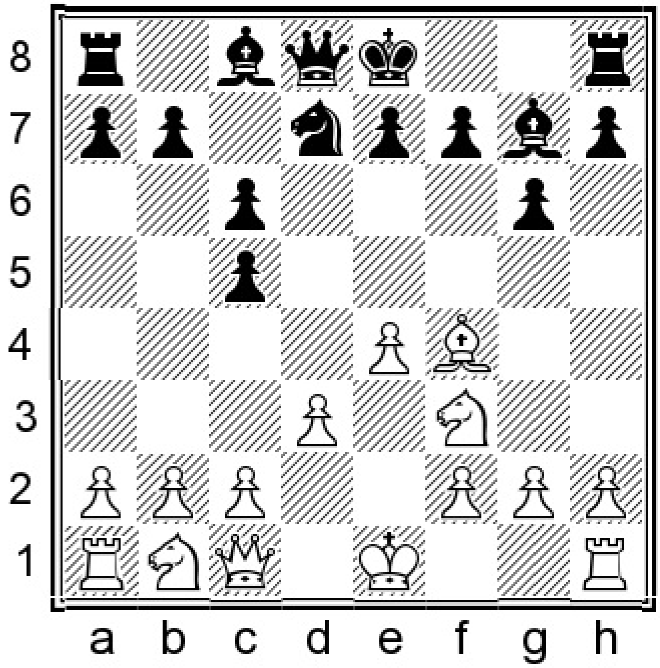
A logical move, preventing 6...e5. Carlsen also displayed a good psychological evaluation of his rival; he said “I guess it serves Moro’s style well,” meaning that Morozevich wants quick development and to gain the initiative as soon as possible.

6...g6

Tactics do not favour Black after 6...e5? 7.♘xe5 ♕f6, as White is a healthy pawn up after 8.♘xd7 ♗xd7 9.♕c1, because 8...♕xb2? loses to 9.♗e5.

7.♕c1

“The logical follow-up,” wrote Carlsen. White wants to exchange bishops with 9.♗h6.



7...♗g7

Question: Really? I don’t understand this. Why has he allowed the obvious move 8.♗h6?

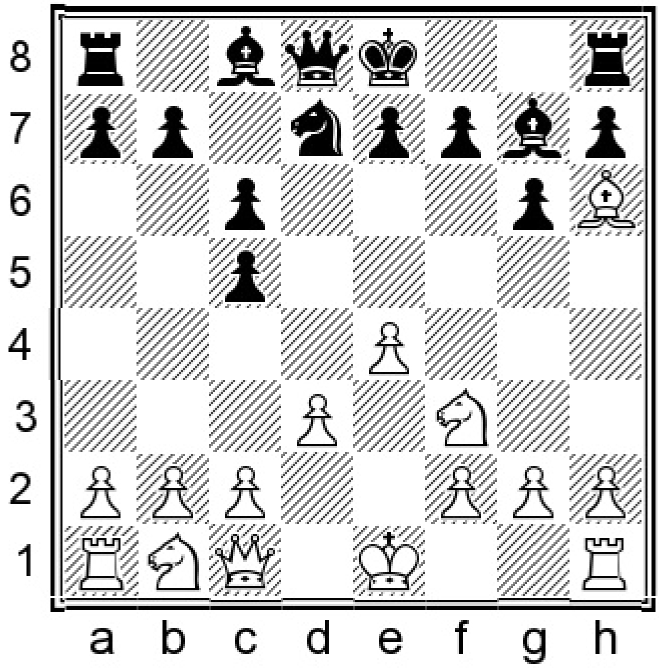
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen of course saw that move coming, and he planned an original idea which he thought deserved some credit. But it is a tactical idea, not positionally justified. The move by itself is not bad, but the idea was not the best.

He explained it saying “I decided to play a bit unusually as well for a change, but it will give me some problems. It was more in the spirit of the position to play 7...h6 with good chances of obtaining a type of position like in the variation 3...g6 4.♗xc6 dxc6 and a normal game.”

7...f6 was also interesting, insisting on playing ...e5.

8.♗h6



Exercise: What idea had Carlsen in mind?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

8...♕a5+!

Creating some discomfort. White must move his king or play 9.c3, weakening d3.

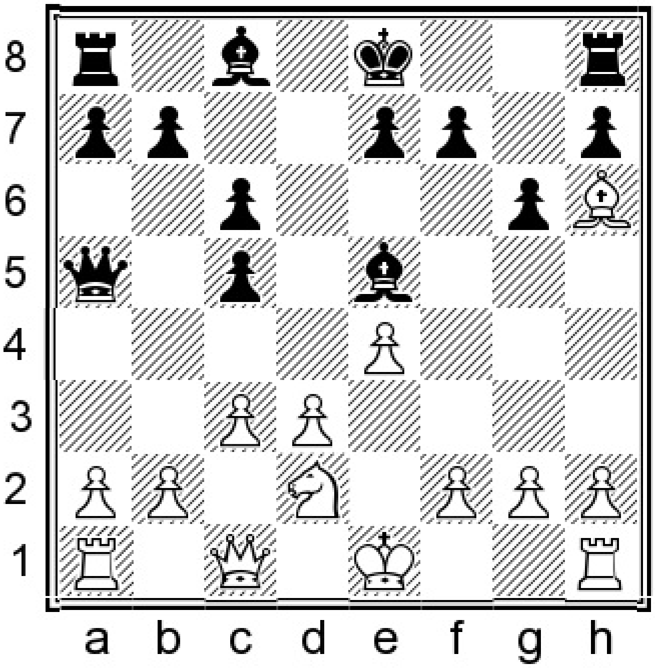
9.c3 ♘e5?!

This was his idea, but it is dubious, as Carlsen said. “The point of my play. However, I had evaluated the arising type of position mistakenly.”

It was better to play the logical 9...0-0!, then 10.h4 must be considered, but Black has enough counterplay with 10...♕b5!. Then 11.♗xg7 ♔xg7 12.h5? is wrong due to 12...♕xd3 13.hxg6 ♕xe4+ 14.♔f1 ♕xg6, so White must defend his d3 pawn playing 12.♕d2 or 12.c4 ♕a5+ 13.♘c3. In both cases, Black has time to reorganize his defence and White’s attack is halted.

10.♘xe5 ♗xe5 11.♘d2

Black's position begins to look suspicious; the queen is badly situated, his king can't castle short, and f4 is coming, etc., but still it is not too bad.



11...♕a6?!

Question: I am beginning to dislike Black's position. Is that unjustified?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: No, it is justified, as after this move Black's position begins to deteriorate.

It seems that Carlsen was not happy with his opening experiment. He explained that he chose this "slightly strange" retreat because he was not satisfied with 11...♗e6: he disliked the line 12.♘b3 ♕b5 (or 12...♕b6 13.♗e3 ♗xb3 14.axb3) 13.c4 ♕b6 14.♗e3.

White could probably play even better with the simple 12.0-0 followed by f4.

The computer suggestion 11...♕d8 doesn't inspire confidence either.

So, considering the options, it seems the natural 11...♗e6 was the best try, because now, as Carlsen said, the queen will feel uncomfortable on a6.

12.♕c2 ♗e6 13.f4

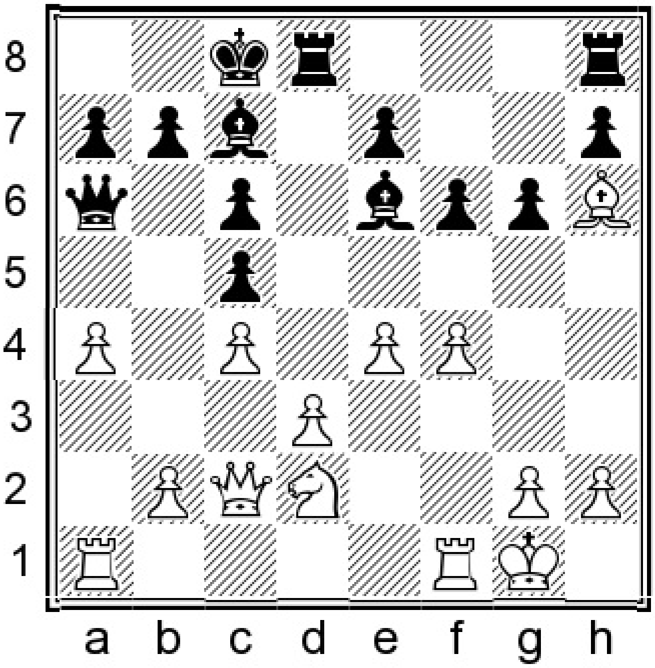
Carlsen was not afraid of 13.♘f3 ♗c7 14.♘g5 0-0-0 (if 14...♗d7 then 15.♕b3 is annoying) 15.♘xe6 fxe6; he thought it "OK for Black due to the pressure on d3."

The move chosen, 13.f4, is more dangerous. White plans to open lines at the right time, taking advantage of the lack of harmony between the black forces.

13...♗c7 14.0-0 f6

To provide the f7-square to the bishop after a possible f4–f5, but now White reinforces his position with two strong moves.

15.c4! 0-0-0 16.a4!



Question: I feel Black's position is becoming worse.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: You are not the only one. White has a free hand to play on both sides.

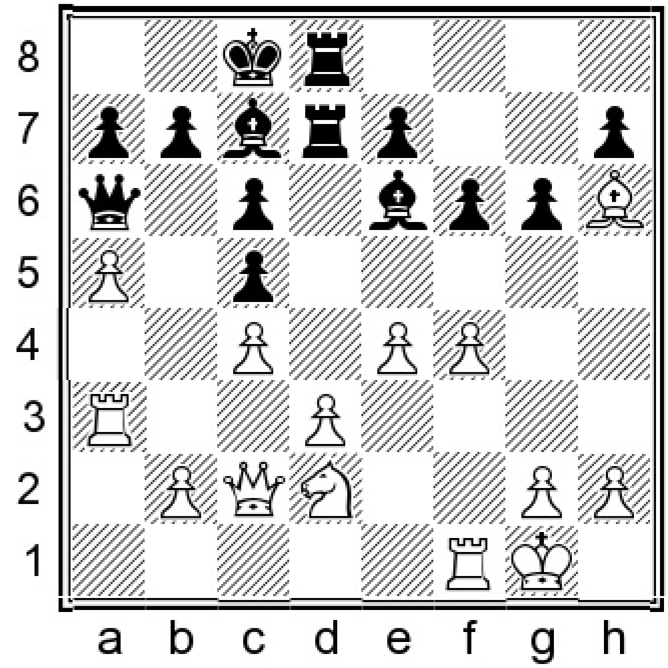
Carlsen was feeling uncomfortable, but he was still optimistic; he said: "Here I finally realised what my opponent was up to, but I still felt that the upcoming complications should be ok for me."

16...♖d7

Unlike his opponent, Black is lacking a plan. Carlsen thought this was the best chance, although the attack on d3 is easily parried.

He disliked 16...♗a5 17.♘b3 ♗b4 18.a5 because "it is fairly cheerless, with the queen totally out of play." White's play can even be improved, inserting 18.f5, and after 18...♗f7 then 19.a5, to play 20.♗e3, and if Black wants to avoid it by playing 19...g5, then 20.e5! is strong.

17.a5 ♖hd8 18.♖a3



18...♗xa5!?

Question: What? Voluntarily pinning the bishop?

Show/Hide Solution

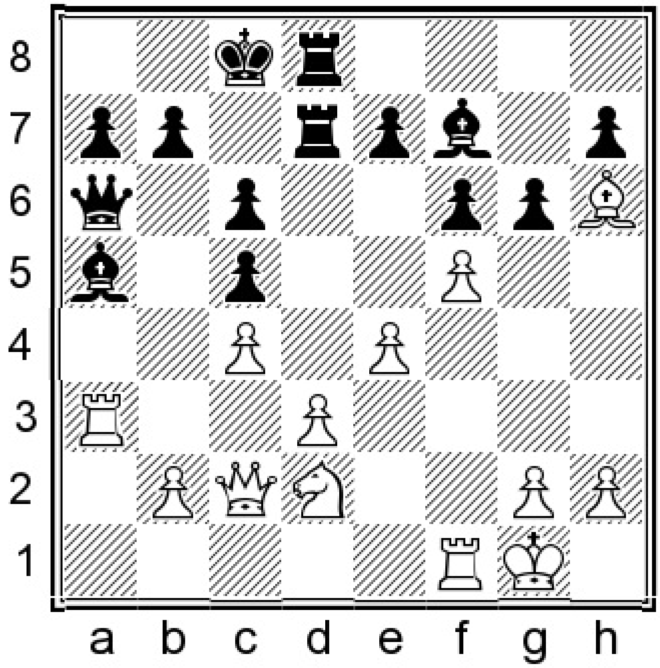
Answer: Carlsen agrees with you: “A terribly risky move, not even the engines prefer this!” but he added: “However, I calculated the variations, and it seemed to me that Black would eventually be fine.”

So, we are talking about concrete variations: a line may look risky, or even bad, but if it works... why not try it?

19.f5!

“A good move, it is useful to include ♗h6 in the game.” (Carlsen).

19...♗f7



20.fxg6

Despite the optimistic evaluation of the young Carlsen, his position is really bad, close to lost. White has several possibilities.

Magnus had calculated deeply the tempting 20.♘b3 ♖xd3 21.♖xa5 and stated that it "gives nothing." He showed this line, which is still fine 14 years later: 21...♕xc4 22.♕xc4 ♗xc4 23.♘xc5 ♖d1 24.♖xd1 ♖xd1+ 25.♔f2 b6 26.♖a4 ♗b5 27.♖xa7 bxc5 28.♖xe7 gxf5 29.exf5 ♖f1+ 30.♔g3 ♖xf5 31.♖xh7 ♖h5!, and Black holds. We will talk about 21.♘xc5 later.

The pin 20.♖fa1 doesn't give much after 20...b6, but the previous 20.e5! is stronger, e.g. 20...fxe5 21.♖fa1 b6 22.♘f3, and Black's position collapses.

20...hxg6 21.e5! ♗e6

"Put the bishop on f5 and activity at any cost!" was Carlsen's plan.

To get rid of the pin isn't enough, because 21...♕b6 22.♖fa1 ♗b4 23.♖xa7 "is not great for Black."

22.exf6

A good move, weakening f6, but 22.♘e4! was even better. If 22...♗f5 then 23.e6! ♗xe6 24.♘xc5 ♕b6 25.♗e3 ♗b4 26.♕f2! is virtually winning for White. Black has more choices but objectively he is almost lost.

Carlsen never mentioned the possibility of trying to take advantage of the pin by playing ♖fa1, but it is always a move to consider. In fact, here 22.♖fa1 b6 23.♘e4 was also good for White.

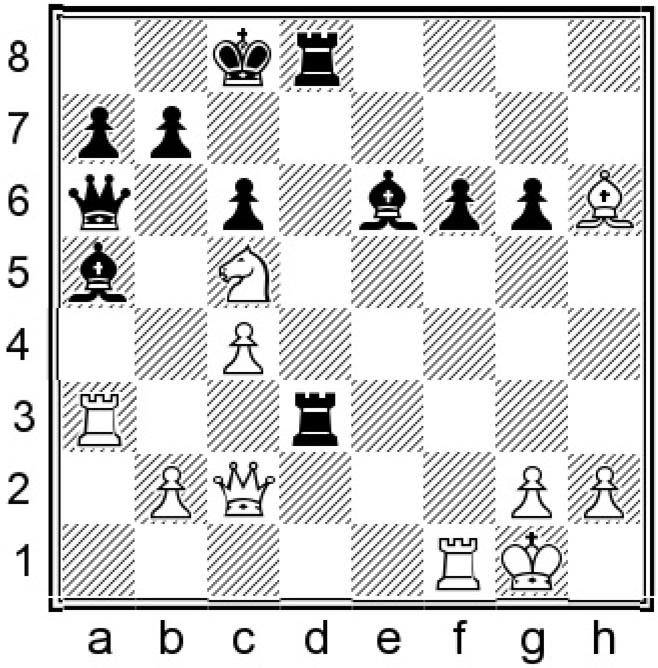
22...exf6 23.♘b3

Of course, not 23.♖xf6? ♗f5. The move played gives White a clear advantage, and we should note that, again, 23.♖fa1 b6 24.♘e4 was also strong.

23...♖xd3

Forced, as 23...b6? loses to 24.♖xf6.

24.♘xc5



Exercise: What had Carlsen planned when he chose the risky continuation?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

24...♗b6!

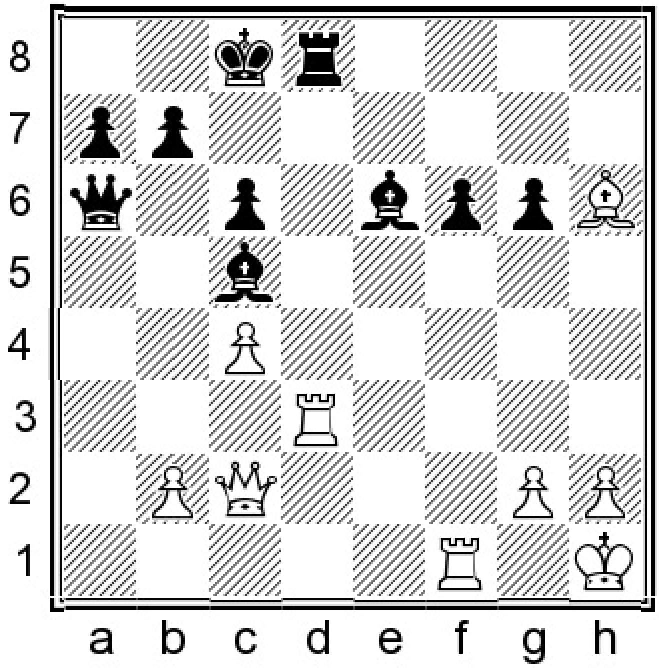
Carlsen had calculated this nice queen sacrifice, and it is the only move that keeps Black in the game.

This move would also be the answer in case of 21.♘xc5 on move 20 in the variation discussed above. Black would answer 21...♗b6 with a similar continuation.

The alternatives were much worse, 24...♕b6 25.♖xa5 ♕xa5 26.♘xd3 or 26.♘xe6 and 24...♕xc4 25.♕xc4 ♗xc4 26.♘xd3 ♗b6+ 27.♘f2 ♗xf1 28.♔xf1 with no hope for Black.

25.♖xa6

Carlsen said that during the game he was more worried about 25.♖xd3 ♗xc5+ 26.♔h1.



Exercise: Why were his fears unfounded?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen didn’t trust the simplification 26...♖xd3 27.♕xd3 ♗xc4 28.♕h3+ f5 because his king “did not feel too safe here” after 29.♖e1 or the possibly stronger 29.♖c1, when White’s chances are preferable.

So, “I eventually found this continuation, and even if I still was not too sure about it, it seemed to me that I would survive”: 26...♗d4!, threatening 27...♗xc4 with the rooks on the board, he didn’t fear 27.b3 ♗f5, which forces 28.♖xf5, while 27.♖xd4 ♖xd4 28.♕xg6 ♕xc4 29.♕xf6 b6!, giving space to the king, leads to a complex position. g2 is a clear target and Black is fine.

25...♗xc5+ 26.♔h1 bxa6

With amazing self-confidence, Carlsen wrote: “During the game I was totally convinced that I was fine here, with my active pieces, however, White probably has a forced continuation leading to a better game for him even if Black has counterchances.”

Black has only a rook, a bishop and a pawn for the queen, so it is not surprising that he is on the verge of losing.

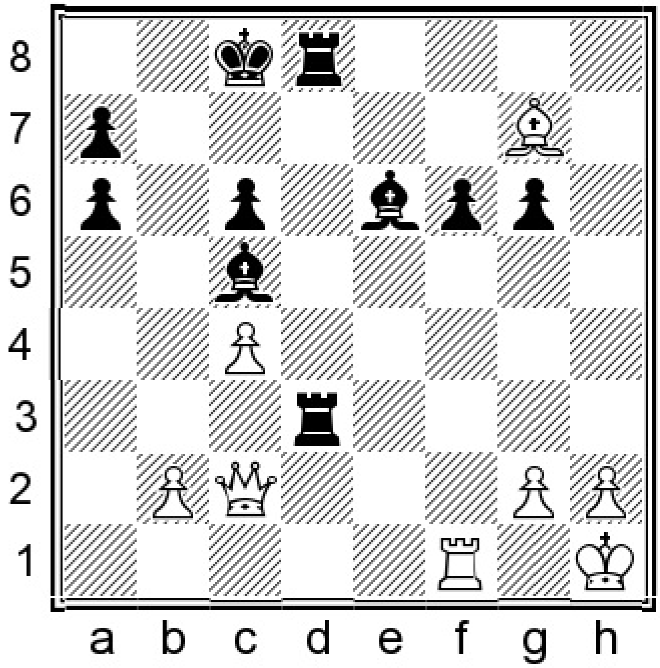
We can imagine that world champion Carlsen in 2020 would smile seeing how optimistic this 16 year-old Magnus Carlsen was.

27.♗g7??

“Too careless, and meeting a surprising refutation.”

White is much better playing 27.♕e2!, to chase the e6-bishop back; after 27...♗g8 (not 27...♗xc4? 28.♕g4+) then the luft 28.h3 and Black will suffer, while 27...♗f7 is worse due to 28.♗g5! fxg5 29.♖xf7.

Carlsen mentioned the also strong continuation 27.b4! ♗b6 (27...♗xb4? 28.♕a4) 28.♕e2!, looking at e6 and protecting f1. “I did not see this move, which turns out to be quite strong, and the only one which poses Black any problems,” (Carlsen). 28...♗f7 (better than 28...♗f5 29.g4! and 28...♗xc4?? 29.♕g4+), and instead of 29.♕e4, the engines suggest 29.c5! ♗c7, and now, with both black bishops in passive positions, White can play 30.♗g5 fxg5 31.♖xf7 with an advantage, or even 30.♖xf6, without fearing 30...♖d1+ 31.♖f1 ♗b3 32.♕xa6+ followed by 33.♔g1, with a winning position, although this decision is more suitable for computers.



Question: What is the unexpected refutation?

Show/Hide Solution

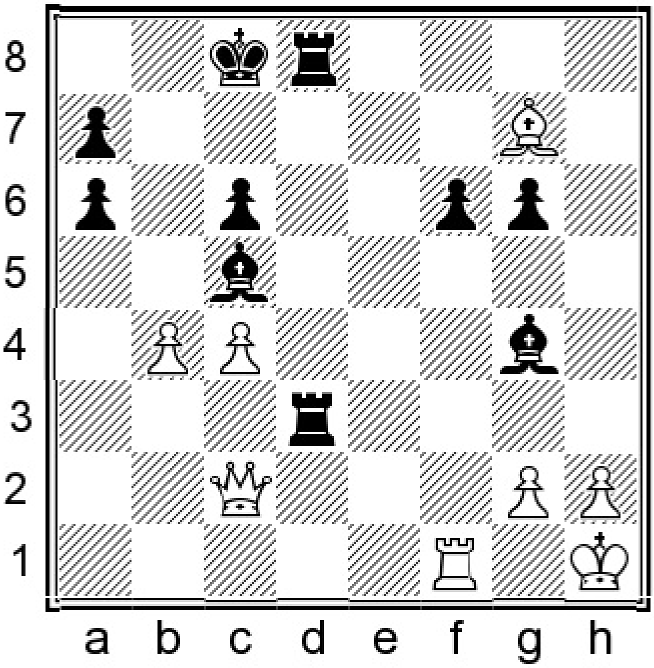
Answer:

27...♗g4!

“Surprisingly enough, after this there is no way to defend against 28...♖d1.” (Carlsen).

28.b4

White tries to complicate matters. Carlsen mentioned: 28.h3 ♖d1 29.♖xd1 ♖xd1+ 30.♔h2 ♗d6+ 31.g3 ♗f3!, winning, and 28.♕a4 ♖d1! 29.♕xc6+ ♔b8 30.♕xf6 ♖xf1+ 31.♕xf1 ♖d1, winning.



Exercise: White is totally lost, but it doesn’t mean that Black can relax, not yet. What is the best move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

28...♗e3!

Without rushing. As Carlsen pointed out, 28...♗xb4? 29.♕a4 ♖d1 30.♕xc6+ ♔b8 31.♖g1 “is amazingly enough not so clear.” Modern engines see no way to take advantage of the awkward position of the white pieces.

He also mentioned the ending with opposite-coloured bishops after 28...♖d1 29.♖xd1 ♖xd1+ 30.♕xd1 ♗xd1 31.bxc5 f5, which “is probably won too, but more complicated.” But of course not a clear win. What he played is much better, and it avoids all obstacles.

29.h3 ♖d1 30.♖xd1 ♖xd1+ 31.♔h2 ♗f4+ 32.g3 ♖d2+

The ending is won. Funnily, Carlsen commented: “I had somehow overlooked that I could not play 32...♗f3?? 33.gxf4 and the king gets the g3 square! But the game continuation wins easily enough.”

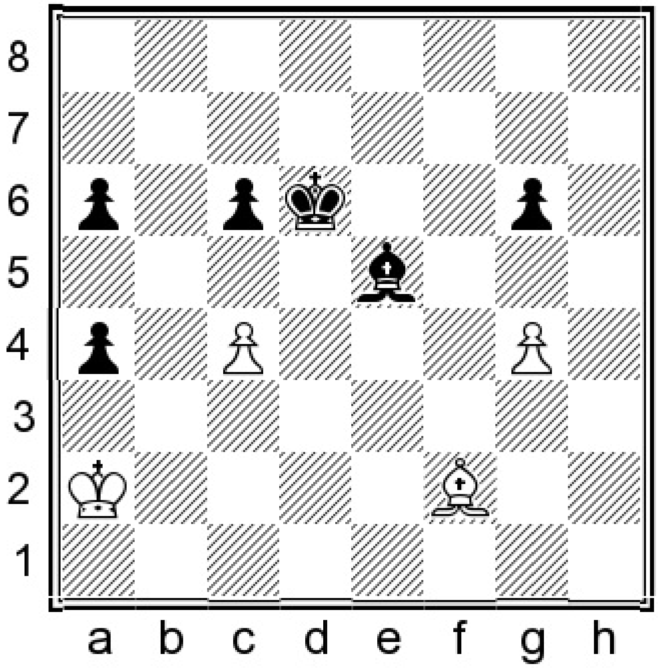
33.♕xd2 ♗xd2 34.hxg4 ♗xb4

Carlsen criticised this move, although it wins with no problem. But maybe he is right and 34...c5 was probably faster, as after 35.bxc5 ♗g5 36.♗f8 a5 37.c6 ♗c1 “White will have to give up the bishop for the a-pawn.”

35.♗xf6 a5

The ending has no difficulty. To stop the a-pawn, White must allow the entrance of the black king and cannot protect his pawns on the kingside.

36.♔g2 ♔d7 37.♔f3 ♗d6! 38.♔e4 ♗xg3 39.♔d3 ♔e6 40.♗d4 a6 41.♔c2 a4 42.♔b1 ♗e5 43.♗f2 ♔d6 44.♔a2



Exercise (easy): The ending has no big problems for Black, but it is always better to play accurately. Which is the best move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

44...♗c3!

Black prepares the entrance of his king to capture the g-pawn. We notice that he played 43...♔d6 earlier, so 45.♗g3+ is now answered by 45...♔c5.

45.♔a3 ♔e5 46.♔xa4 ♔f4 47.♗b6 ♔xg4 48.♗a5 ♗xa5 49.♔xa5 ♔f4 50.♔b6 a5

0–1

The young Carlsen emerged as a winner not in his usual Lasker style, but this time more in a Houdini fashion.

He was too optimistic in the opening and got a bad position, so he was forced to play riskily, to try to make things harder for his stronger opponent.

He successfully complicated the position in a Laskerian way and even if he was worse, he stayed in the game.

Two things are noticeable from this game, how Morozevich blundered with 27.♗g7??, and the innate self-confidence we can see in Carlsen's commentaries. That is something essential to reach the highest levels.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Trusting in tactics while neglecting development is always risky, and they need close examination before playing them. (9...♘e5? *9...0-0!*).

2.) Even in bad positions there are chances to fight. (*21...♗b6!* 24...♗b6!).

3.) Dvoretsky continually emphasizes the importance of "prophylactic thinking". It is useful to ask oneself "What is my opponent intending to play?" (27.♗g7?? 28...♗e3! *28...♗xb4?*).

4.) King safety is almost always a key factor in the middlegame and also in the ending. (*27.♕e2!* 27...♗g4!).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

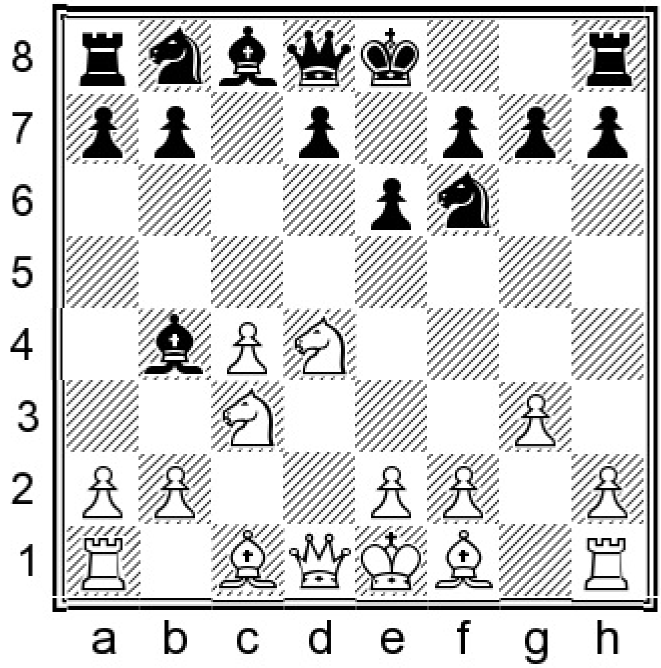
Game 2

Dmitry Jakovenko – Magnus Carlsen

Nimzo-Indian Defence [E20]

Tal Memorial, Moscow (3), 12.11.2007

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♗b4 4.♘f3 c5 5.g3 cxd4 6.♘xd4



Question: This line is rarely seen, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: We can call this line the Romanishin Variation. Yes, these days this variation is not very popular, but it used to be. The stellar moment arrived when Kramnik defeated Anand in the 10th game of the World Championship in Bonn 2008 with the white pieces.

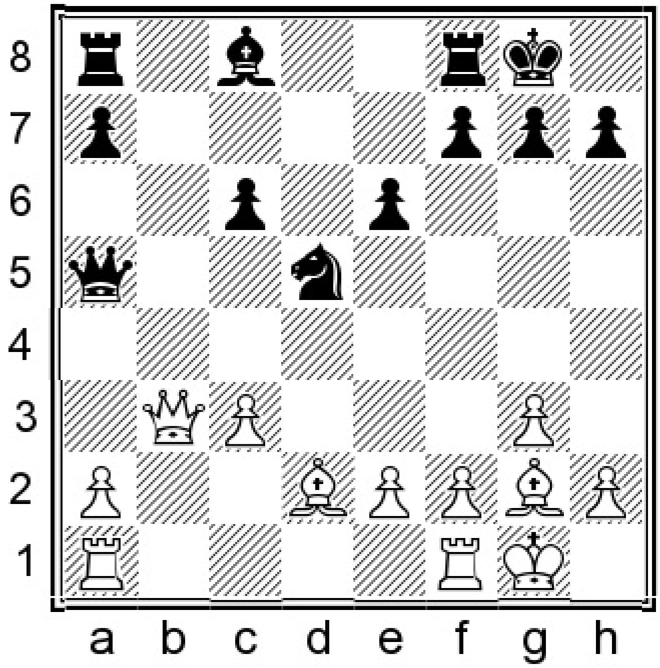
Theory extends to more than 20 moves; this is what Carlsen commented after 4.♘f3: “I hadn’t seen Jakovenko play this before, so I was somewhat surprised. I soon remembered that Grischuk played this way against Gelfand in the World Championship, so Jakovenko had to be well prepared for the main lines with ...c5. Anyway, I decided to follow my preparation.”

Both Carlsen and Jakovenko have played this line with both colours.

6...0-0

The alternative is 6...♘e4.

7.♗g2 d5 8.cxd5 ♘xd5 9.♕b3 ♕a5 10.♗d2 ♘c6 11.♘xc6 bxc6 12.0-0 ♗xc3 13.bxc3



Question: You told me this is all theory, accepted by the strongest players, but I see White has the two bishops, so what does Black have in return?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, White has the two bishops, which may be an advantage in the future, but here they are not so relevant, because they are not very active, and the pawn structure gives Black access to some squares.

Maybe White is slightly better, but all will be decided by who plays better.

13...♗a6 14.♖fd1 ♕c5

Carlsen had something clear in mind. He said “14...♖ab8 15.c4 ♕c5 16.cxd5 ♖xb3 17.axb3 and 14...♗xe2 15.c4 are both known to give White relatively risk-free pressure.”

This theory still has the same evaluation 13 years later; curiously, we can see examples of the queen sacrifice mentioned in the first line from 1995 (!) played by Nielsen, who later become Carlsen’s second.

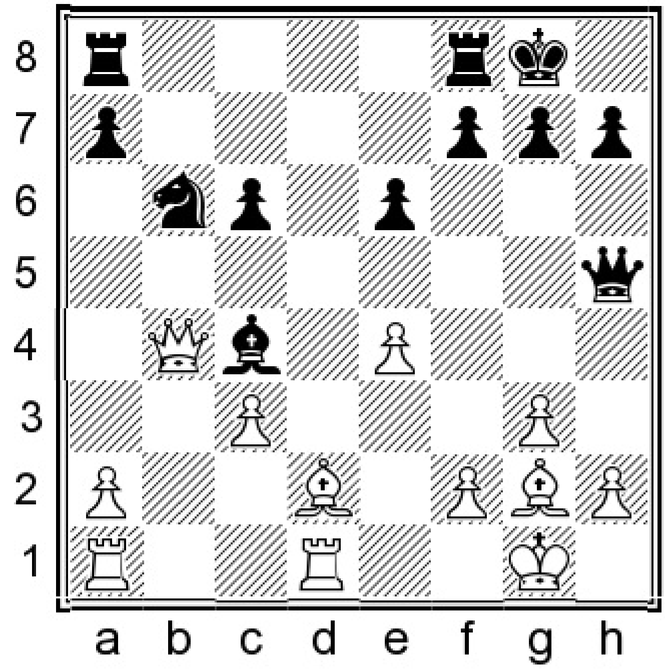
15.e4

This move is necessary to chase the knight from his strong position, but the g2-bishop is less active, and also (important for the future), the f3 square is weakened, so while 15.e4 is necessary to try to progress and it is a good move, Black gets compensation, too.

15...♗c4 16.♕a4 ♘b6

The black minor pieces have reasonable squares.

17.♕b4 ♕h5



18.♗f4

The 5.g3 variation was played occasionally before 2008, but the big impulse came after 18.♖e1, played in Kramnik – Anand, Bonn (m/10) 2008. Black is fine, but after 18...c5 19.♕a5 ♖fc8 20.♗e3

Kramnik gradually outplayed Anand. Black played the typical manoeuvre 20...♗e2 21.♗f4 e5 22.♗e3 ♗g4 23.♕a6! f6?! 24.a4 (1–0 in 29 moves).

The line decreased in popularity when Black found ways to equalize. Jakovenko faced 18.♗e3 in a blitz game later, but White's pressure was not great after 18...♗e2 19.♖d2 ♖ab8 (19...♘c4? loses to 20.g4! ♕xg4 21.f3) 20.♗xb6 axb6 21.a4 c5 22.♕b3 ♗f3 23.♗xf3 ♕xf3 24.♖e1 h5, played in Bologan – Lysyj, Poikovsky Karpov 2015, draw in 40 moves.

We will find opportunities to reach similar major piece endings later in this game (with different pawn structures), and Carlsen will mention another one later.

18...c5

Carlsen continues with the theory of that year. He likes this move, which is probably the best, whereas he rejected 18...♗e2, played in the mentioned Grischuk – Gelfand game, Mexico City 2007. It continued 19.♖e1 c5 20.♕b3 e5 21.♗c1 "where White developed some pressure," said Carlsen.

White won, and the game continued 21...♖ac8 22.a4 ♗c4 23.♕b2. Now, instead of the chosen move 23...♕g6, Black seems to be fine playing 23...♗e6, freeing up c4 for the knight and with ...♖fd8 to come. The queen on h5 is well placed, as it would support a timely ...♖d1.

19.♕b2

In Cheparinov – Carlsen, World Cup, Khanty Mansiysk 2007, played only three weeks later, White played 19.♕a5.

Carlsen said "After playing a few more moves relatively quickly I realised that there was an embarrassing flaw in my preparations, after which I had to defend an endgame a pawn down, which I luckily managed to do. That game continued 19...e5 20.♗e3 ♗e2 21.♖e1 ♘c4 22.♕a6 ♘xe3 23.♖xe2 ♘xg2 24.♔xg2. The position is quite symmetrical, but the black pawns are weaker than the white ones, and one of them is bound to fall fairly soon, which did indeed happen in the game."

In that game Black got a worse version of what we saw in Bologan – Lysyj, Poikovsky Karpov 2015, as his position is more passive.

Carlsen had some problems, but his position seems good. He could improve his play several times, e.g., instead of 22...♘xe3 he could play 22...♖fd8; if 23.h3 then 23...♗d3, while if 23.♗xc5, even 23...♖dc8 (we will see this lost tempo with the rook mentioned by Carlsen later), and Black has all his pieces on active squares. Now the simplifications exchanging the minor pieces will end with Black taking the c3-pawn with equal chances. That could happen now after 24.♗e3.

19...♖ad8

"This appears to be a novelty. I had indeed prepared the move at home, but it's probably the most natural move anyway, so I guessed that Jakovenko had taken it into account," said Carlsen in 2007.

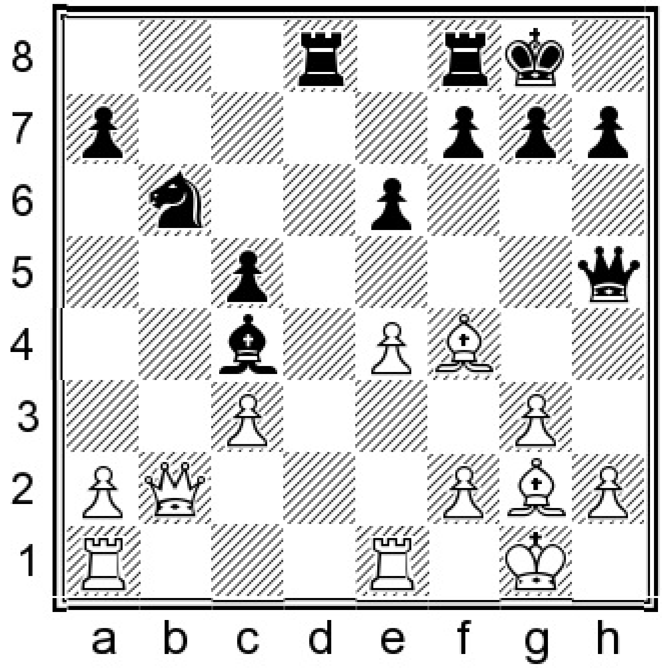
In 2020 the engines prefer 19...e5 20.♗e3 ♖fc8, and believe the position remains balanced.

20.♖e1?!

“He spent some time for this move, which was a surprise for me. Anyway, I couldn’t remember what to do against it, so I think we were both on our own from now on,” said Carlsen.

Stepping aside from concrete variations, we can assume that this move, giving up the open file, would have been a pleasant surprise for Carlsen; it is a strange move, White is not worse but it doesn’t pose Black problems.

Carlsen said there were two important alternatives, one is 20.♖xd8 ♖xd8 21.h3, and here 21...e5 seems to give Black a reasonable position. Black must sacrifice a pawn in several lines, but obtains enough counterplay, for example after 22.g4 ♕g6 23.♗xe5 h5. The second line mentioned by Carlsen is 20.f3, then Black has a good answer, 20...f5!, and he is fine.



Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20...♖d7

“I liked this move, which prepares the doubling of the rooks, while at the same time protecting the a-pawn, enabling me to meet ♕a3 with ...♖c8. Apparently, Black has no problems here.” (Carlsen).

21.h3

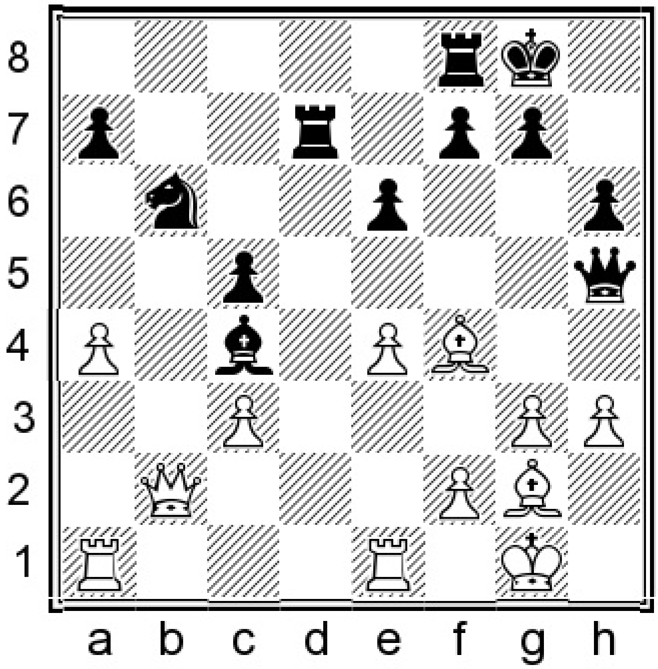
Carlsen call this move “A natural move, giving the king some air and preparing g4 in some lines.”

A reasonable alternative was 21.f3. White may be able to use f2 later, playing ♕f2.

21...h6

Carlsen explained that he preferred to make a useful waiting move instead of the natural 21...♖fd8, because the rook will probably have to go to c8 anyway, for example after 21...♖fd8 22.♕a3. This is the tempo lost we mentioned on move 19.

22.a4



"My opponent probably felt that since he didn't have many useful moves, he had to do something active," said Carlsen

Exercise: How did he reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

22...♗a6!

"I have to make space for the knight. I like this move better than ...♗d3, as the bishop seemed to be a little loose there in some lines," said Carlsen, rightly, because 22...♗d3 23.a5 ♘c4 24.♕b5 is unpleasant, at least over the board, and Black most probably has to give up a pawn.

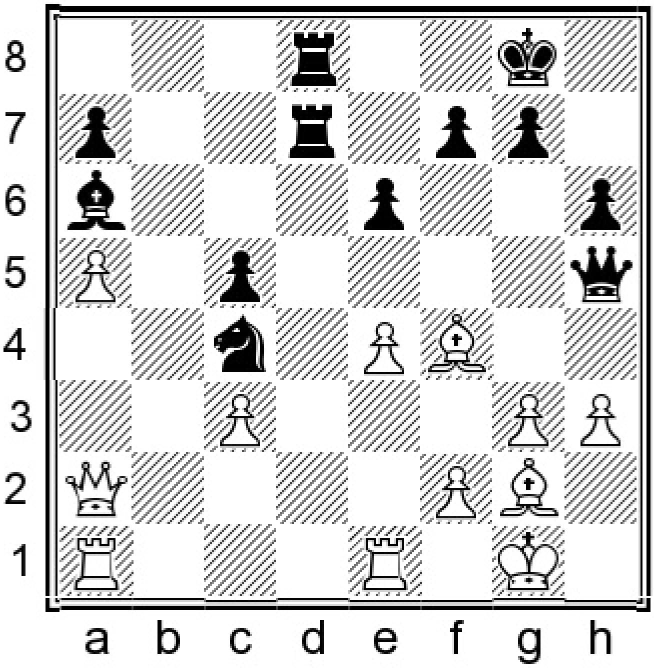
23.♕a2?!

A second dubious move. Carlsen was diplomatic, he called it "The sharpest move", but he also pointed out that it was probably not the best one. The queen evades a future ...♘c4; normally it is good to make a “forced move” in advance, to have more options later, but in this case it seems insufficient.

Carlsen said that he received a draw offer “here (or maybe on the next move), but since I was ahead on time and liked my position, I declined.”

Carlsen suggested that 23.g4 ♕h4 24.♖ed1 “was safer and probably better, but Black is certainly not worse in any case.”

23...♖fd8 24.a5 ♘c4



25.♗f1

The move 25.e5 was an important alternative, said Carlsen.

Exercise: How would Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: He said he “would then have had to play the energetic 25...g5!”, and White has problems to defend several fronts: the e5-pawn, d2, d1, and his kingside, e.g. 26.♗c1? loses to 26...♖d1 27.♗a3 ♖xe1+ 28.♖xe1 ♖d1 29.♖xd1 ♕xd1+ 30.♔h2, and now, among other moves, the simplest is 30...♕a4, indicated by Carlsen.

White is also worse after 26.g4 ♕g6 27.♗g3 ♘d2!, followed by ...h5, while something similar happens after 27.♗e4 ♕g7 28.♗g3 ♘d2 “with very active play and probably the better chances,” said Carlsen.

The energetic 25...g5! is indeed the best choice of the engines in 2020.

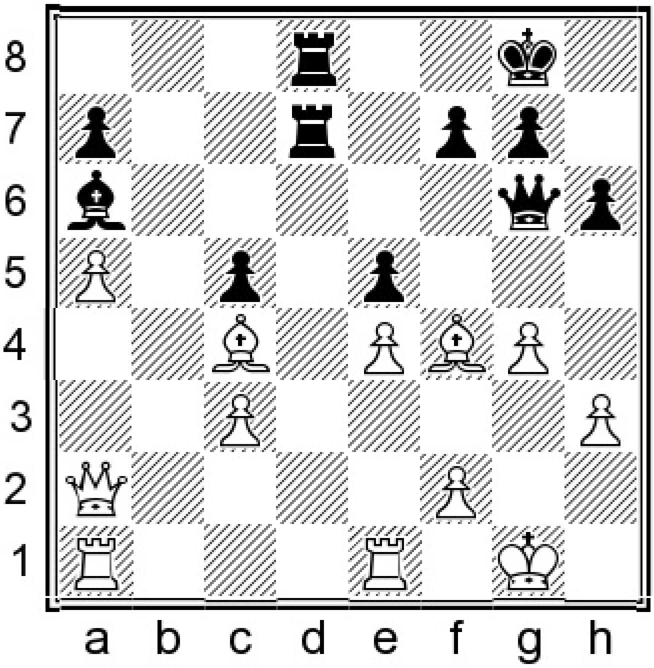
25...e5 26.g4

“Practically forced, as 26.♗c1 ♖d1 27.g4 ♖xe1! 28.gxh5 ♖dd1 is disastrous for White,” said Carlsen, and he was right again.

Black also had other strong moves, such as 26...♘d2!, with a crushing initiative.

26...♕g6 27.♗xc4

Again, almost forced, as after 27.♗g3 ♘d2 28.♗g2 h5! 29.f3 hxg4 30.hxg4 ♖d3 White is defenceless.



Exercise: Which is the right capture?

Show/Hide Solution

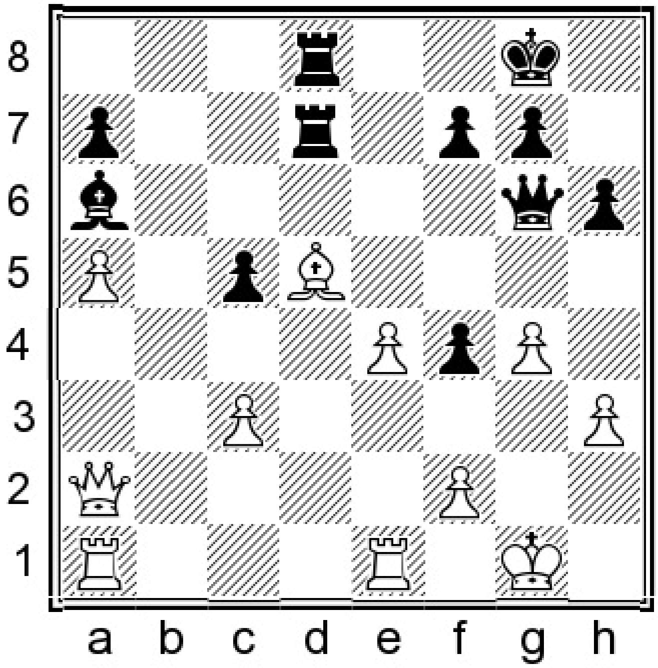
Answer:

27...exf4!

Much better than 27...♗xc4 28.♕xc4 exf4 29.♕xc5, then Black can play 29...♖d3 with compensation for the pawn. That position was not bad, “but rather drawish-looking. I wanted more at this point,” said Carlsen. White doesn’t seem to be worse in the resulting position and he can play several moves, such as 30.♕e5.

28.♗d5

“The logical follow-up,” said Carlsen. The exchange 28.♗xa6 would abandon control of the d-file, whereas with the move played White is trying to nullify Black’s control.



Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

28...f3!

A strong move. Black remembers the d5-bishop is now cut off from the kingside, and “Black is just in time to prevent White from playing c4 with the better position,” said Carlsen; the next move is almost surely 29...h5.

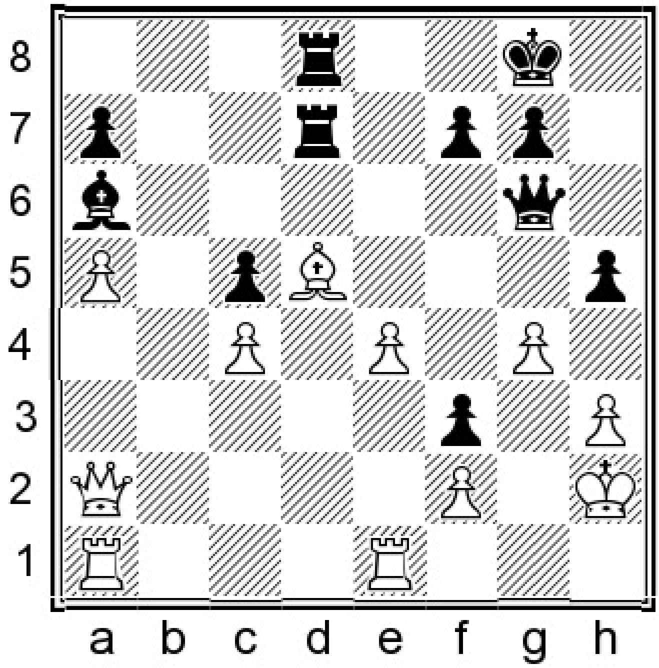
29.c4?

Almost a losing move. “White simply doesn’t have time for this,” said Carlsen.

He mentioned 29.♖e3 ♗e2 30.♖xe2 fxe2 31.♕xe2 ♖b8, which “is not very pleasant for White, but it does give him reasonable chances for survival due to his strong bishop.”

A better try is 29.♕d2!; after 29...♗c4 30.♕f4 ♗xd5 31.exd5 ♖xd5 32.♖e7 the f3-pawn can be recovered at any time, White gets activity and is only slightly worse.

29...h5 30.♔h2



Exercise: How did Carlsen raise the pressure?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

30...♕f6!

"Threatening ...♕f4 in some lines, and quite importantly, attacking the apparently well protected a1–rook," said Carlsen.

This is by far the most "human" move; strangely, the engines slightly prefer 30...♕h6, without hitting a1.

31.♖g1?! hxg4?!

This is not the best move, as we will see. Black misses a very strong move and White is conceded a chance to fight.

32.♖ab1?

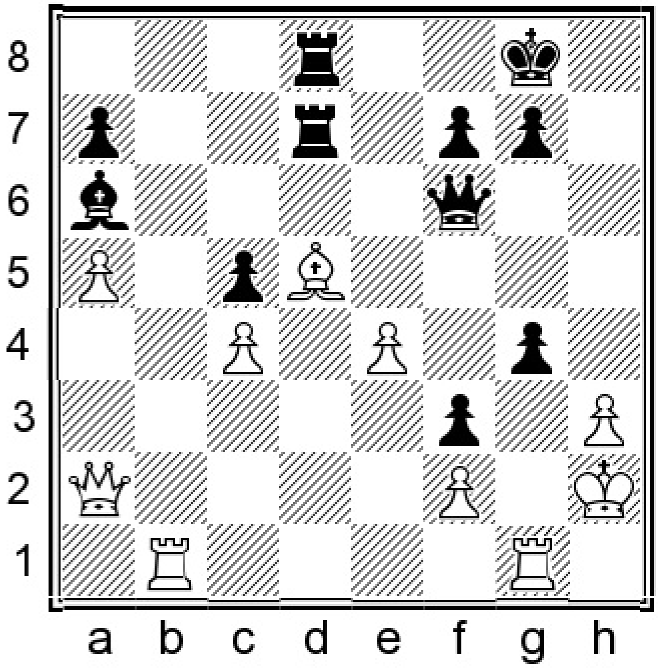
White doesn't grab his chance.

"32.♖ac1? ♕f4+ 33.♔h1 ♕h6! was certainly not better than the game," said Carlsen, rightly, in 2007.

After 32.♖xg4 ♗xc4 he wrote that 33.♗xc4 would not save the position. He mentioned 33...♖d2 34.♕a4 (or 34.♕a3 ♖xf2+ 35.♔g1 ♕d4 or 35....♖dd2 both winning) 34...♖xf2+ 35.♔g1 ♖fd2! "with the lethal threats of ...♕d4+ and ...♕e5–h2." There are more winning moves, but not 35...♕d4?? 36.♗xf7+!.

He thought that after 32.♖xg4 ♗xc4 White had to try 33.♕xc4! ♕xa1 34.♕xc5 "with some saving chances."

However, White has a better defence, 32.♖ad1!, removing the rook from the attack and overprotecting the bishop. White seems to be slightly worse at the very least, but not lost. Then 32...gxh3? is bad due to 33.♖g3, while 32...♖b8 33.♖b1 or 32...♕e5+ 33.♖g3 ♖b7 34.♕d2 allows White to fight on. But not 34.♗xf7+?? ♔xf7 35.♖xd8 ♖b2, winning, or 34.♗xb7? ♖xd1 35.♗xa6 ♕xe4 and Black again wins.



Exercise: How did Carlsen finish off the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

32...♗xc4!

"I guess my opponent missed this stroke, which combines a couple of tactical motifs," said Carlsen. This combination was missed before: 31...♗xc4! was also winning, or first 31...♕f4+ and then 32...♗xc4!.

33.♕xc4 ♕f4+ 34.♖g3

Protecting h3 in advance. 34.♔h1 is no better, e.g. 34...♖xd5 35.♕c3 ♕h6 36.♖g3 ♖h5, winning, or 35.♖b8 ♕h6 36.♖xd8+ ♖xd8 37.♖g3 ♖d1+ 38.♔h2 ♕d2 39.♕xc5 ♖f1 40.♕c8+ ♔h7 41.♕f5+ ♔h6, winning. White has no perpetual check.

34...♖xd5 35.♕xd5

White has no way to avoid the infiltration of the black rooks via d2 (or d1 or h5 in some lines), with a winning attack. If 35.♖b2 then 35...♖h5 wins immediately.

Let’s see another example: 35.♔g1 ♖d1+ 36.♖xd1 ♖xd1+ 37.♔h2 ♕e5 38.♕a6 ♕d4 39.♕c8+ ♔h7 and there is no perpetual check here either.

Now White gets two rooks for the queen, but it is clearly not enough, as the white pieces are poorly placed, his king is weak, and Black has more pawns.

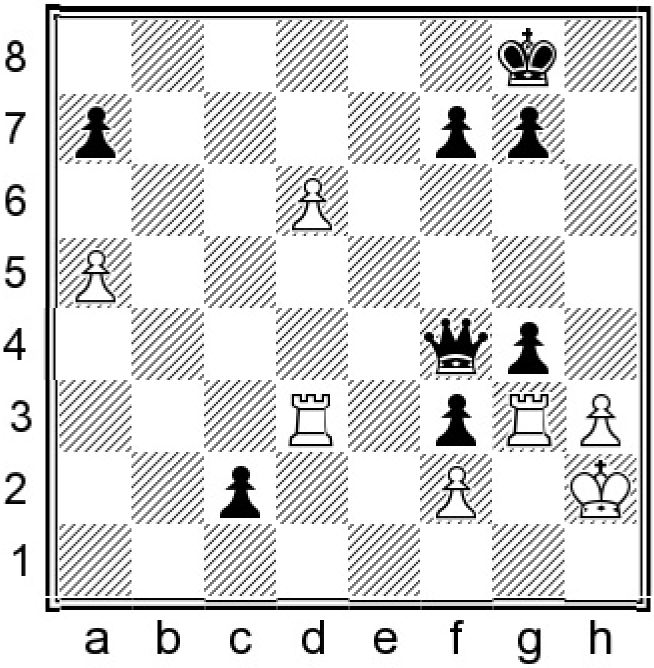
35...♖xd5 36.exd5 c4

The engines show the materialistic 36...f5 as their first option, but this is also winning and “The simplest. White has such bad coordination that it’s hard to stop the c-pawn.” (Carlsen).

37.♖d1

“A desperate attempt. But White was lost anyway,” said Carlsen. The white d-pawn is no match for the black c-pawn.

37...c3 38.d6 c2 39.♖d3



Exercise: Carlsen has several winning moves and he made the strongest one. What did he play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

39...♕c4!

Mate in 10 moves say the engines. Carlsen pointed out “39...c1=♕ 40.d7 ♕c2 41.d8=♕+ ♔h7 42.♕h4+ ♕h6 would also have won, but I tried to be precise till the end.”

40.♖e3 ♕c6

40...c1=♕ 41.d7 ♕d2 and 40...♕f1 were quicker, “but the text is more than sufficient.” (Carlsen).

41.♖d3 ♕c5!

“And since 42.♖d2 c1=♕ would attack the white rook White has no sensible way to protect f2, so he resigned. My only victory in the Tal memorial so far, but a very pleasing one!” was Carlsen’s last comment of the game.

0–1

Magnus entered into well-known territory; the theory was still not completely developed but there were already important examples. He had done his homework and had faith in his preparation.

This time, his play resembled more Capablanca’s than Lasker’s. He played natural moves and gained an advantage after dubious play from his opponent, finishing with a little combination.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Modern chess is a lot about concrete variations, but general considerations also have the right to exist! (20.♖e1? 20...♖d7!).

2.) Even in bad positions there are chances to fight. (*29.♕d2! 32.♖ad1!*).

3.) Dvoretsky continually emphasized the importance of “prophylactic thinking”. It is useful to ask oneself “What is my opponent intending to play?” (29.c4? 31...hxg4? 32.♖ab1?).

4.) The unsafe king, weaknesses and exposed pieces in the opposing camp almost always grant positive results. (30...♕f6! *31...♗xc4!* 32...♗xc4!).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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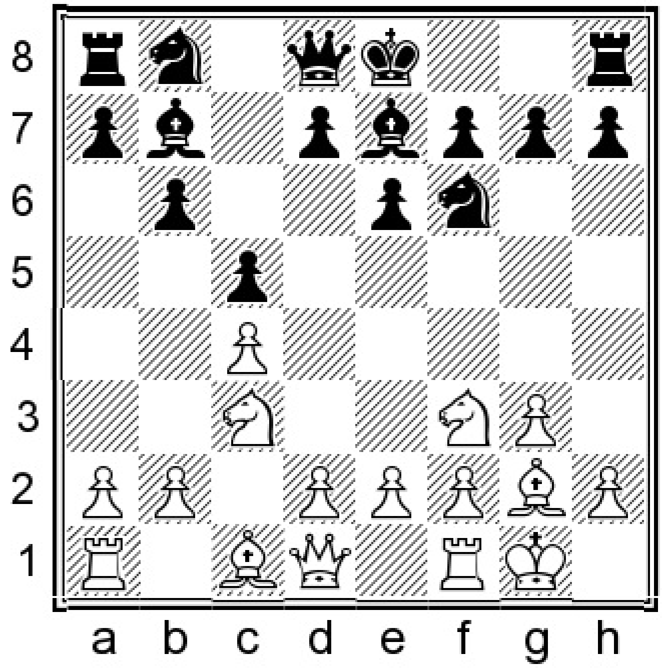
Game 3
Vladimir Kramnik – Magnus Carlsen

English Opening [A30]

Corus Wijk aan Zee (12), 26.01.2008

1.♘f3 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 c5 4.g3 b6 5.♗g2 ♗b7 6.0-0 ♗e7



7.d4

We arrive at a Hedgehog structure. This set-up became very popular in the 70s thanks to the games of Andersson, Ljubojevic, and Adorjan, among others.

Black's moves are rather automatic. He wants to place his b8-knight on d7, then almost certainly ...♖c8, ...♖e8, ...♗f8, etc., preparing the liberating moves ...d5 and/or ...b5.

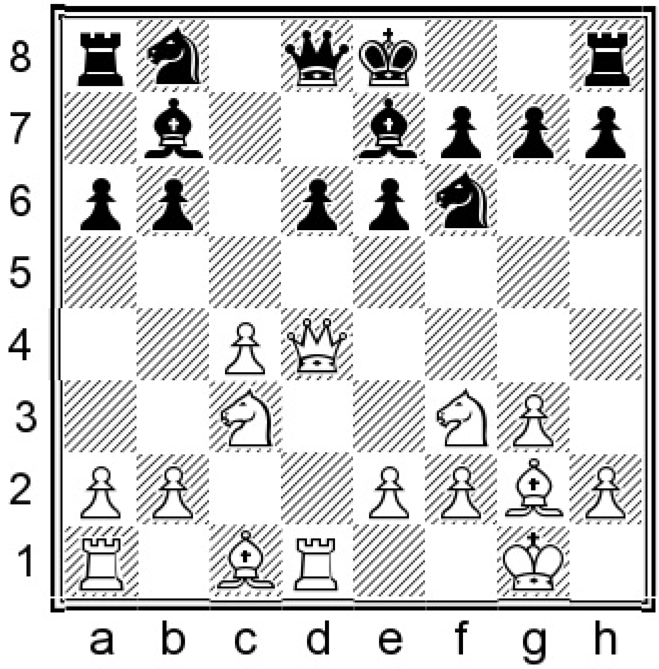
Lately 7.♖e1, trying to play e4 and then d4 without exchanging the g2-bishop, has been popular. Black can accept it or play ...d5, arriving at a different type of structure.

Carlsen playing White also tried 7.♖e1 in those younger years.

7...cxd4 8.♕xd4

8.♘xd4 is considered innocuous; after the exchange of bishops Black has more space and a freer game.

8...d6 9.♖d1 a6



10.♘g5

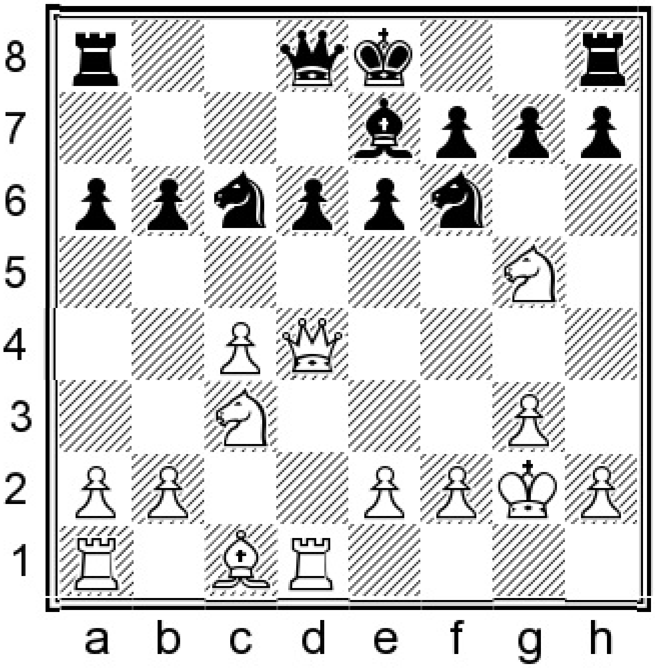
Question: I don't know much about this structure, but you just implied that White should not exchange bishops. What is this?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: That is a general rule, but it can be broken if there is an idea behind it. White wants to press against the d6-pawn with a rapid ♘e4.

We must take into consideration practical factors, too. Carlsen was aware that this old line was not considered especially dangerous for Black, but he added "if he's well prepared. Unfortunately, I couldn't remember anything, and so I had to start thinking from this point."

10...♗xg2 11.♔xg2 ♘c6



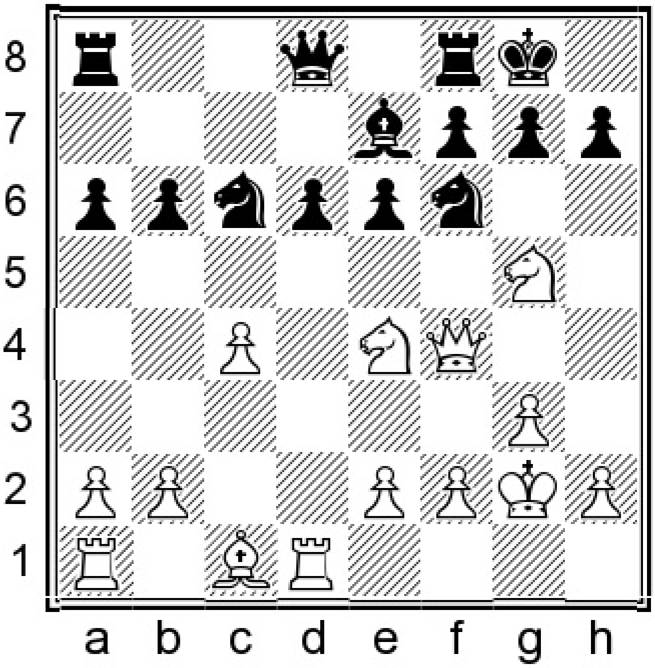
Question: Wasn’t this knight heading for d7?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: That’s the standard destination, yes, but we know the position is already non-standard.

Let’s see how Magnus explained it: “I didn’t find a comfortable way to put this guy on d7, so I came up with this move, which is part of a plan which turned out to have a reasonably good reputation.”

12.♕f4 0-0 13.♘ce4



Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

13...♘e8!

Dvoretsky talked in his books about the “superfluous piece”, the situation in which two (or even three) pieces are all aiming for the same point. In such cases, the opponent should usually avoid exchanges on that square – since only one piece at a time can occupy it, the other pieces become “superfluous”.

It is not the ideal situation here, because the knight retreats to a merely defensive square, but it is still the best move. Carlsen admitted that the black position is now slightly awkward, “but the white knights are not perfectly placed either.”

14.b3 ♖a7

A new deviation from the standard moves. This manoeuvre to activate the rook is possible now that the d7 square is available. The rook will eventually be helpful for defending the d6-pawn.

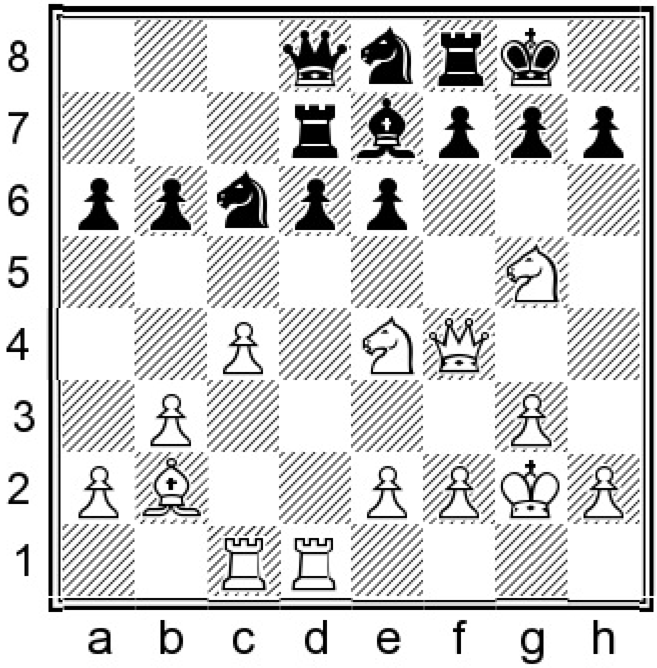
15.♗b2 ♖d7

The rook completes his trip, overprotecting the d6–pawn, which “might turn out to be useful at some point,” as Carlsen said.

There is no better waiting move, and he still thought that the position was “not really easy for Black. His coordination is somewhat worse than it usually is in the Hedgehog.”

About the practical situation: Carlsen had already spent 45 minutes, but Kramnik had also spent almost 40 minutes, “which left me feeling relieved that he was not still in his preparation.”

16.♖ac1



Developing the last inactive piece. Black has no more waiting moves, so he must initiate a plan.

Exercise: What do you think Carlsen played?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

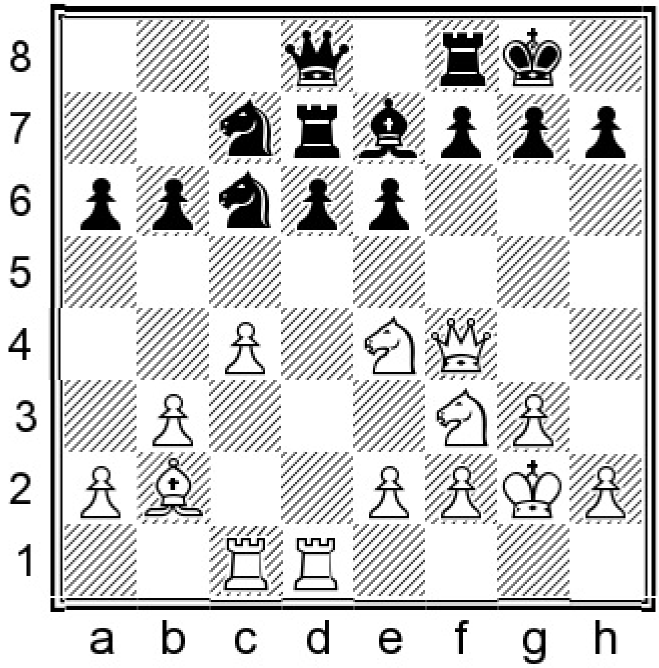
16...♘c7!

Question: I didn’t see that coming; it is a strange square for the knight... Is it the best Black has?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: You are right, the position is developing its own characteristics, or more precisely, has already developed them. Carlsen spent considerable time on this move. He first considered following the usual Hedgehog plan, to prepare ...b5, with e.g. 16...♕a8 17.♘f3 b5, but he rejected it because he said he was unsure if the exchange ...bxc4 bxc4 would really improve his position. That is why he decided to play with a different idea.

17.♘f3



Exercise: How did Carlsen follow his plan?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

17...f5!

Playing 16...♘c7 was the first part of the idea: the knight protected e6, preparing ...f5.

18.♘c3

Exercise: And now? What did he play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18...g5

Question: Wow! He was in a really aggressive mood, wasn’t he?

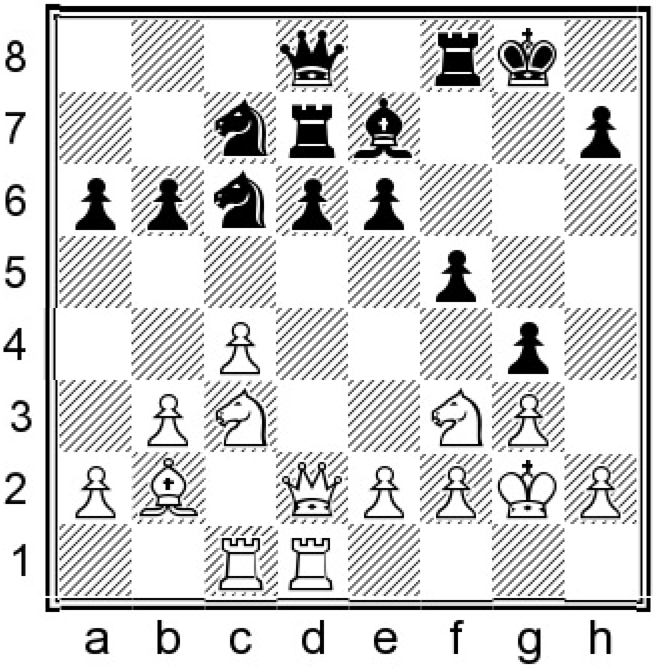
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Not really, this is what Carlsen said: “Not especially aggressive or anything, just a normal continuation of the plan starting with ...♘c7.”

19.♕d2

If White plays 19.♕e3, then 19...g4 will also follow, because the e6-pawn is defended.

19...g4



20.♘e1

Question: So passive! Why not 20.♘d4?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: A natural move, yes, but slightly worse than 20.♘e1 for tactical reasons: the knight on d4 allows the opponent more chances. Black would answer with the same move, in better conditions, as we will see.

Exercise: There is now an important move Carlsen had in mind when he opted for 16...♘c7 and the expansion on the kingside. Which one?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20...♗g5!

"An important element in my plan. The weak f3–square will now be a constant worry for White."

Going back, after 20.♘d4 ♗g5 21.e3 Black could play 21...♘e5, and as Carlsen explained, the knight would be practically untouchable on e5. He emphasized that with the e5-knight hitting at c4 and f3, it would be more difficult for White to create active play, since b4 and c5 would be almost impossible to carry out.

21.e3 ♖ff7

Now 21...♘e5? loses to 22.♘a4, threatening 23.♗xe5 and also 23.♘xb6.

With his chosen move Black overprotects his d7-rook, to avoid problems on the d-file such ♘a4 and then c5. It is also the start of a new redeploying manoeuvre.

22.♔g1 ♘e8

This was the idea; Black wants to play ...♘f6–e4. It is a truly "human" move, and the engines prefer other options.

23.♘e2

"A natural manoeuvre. The diagonal is opened for his bishop and the knight is transferred to a better square." (Carlsen).

23...♘f6 24.♘f4 ♕e8

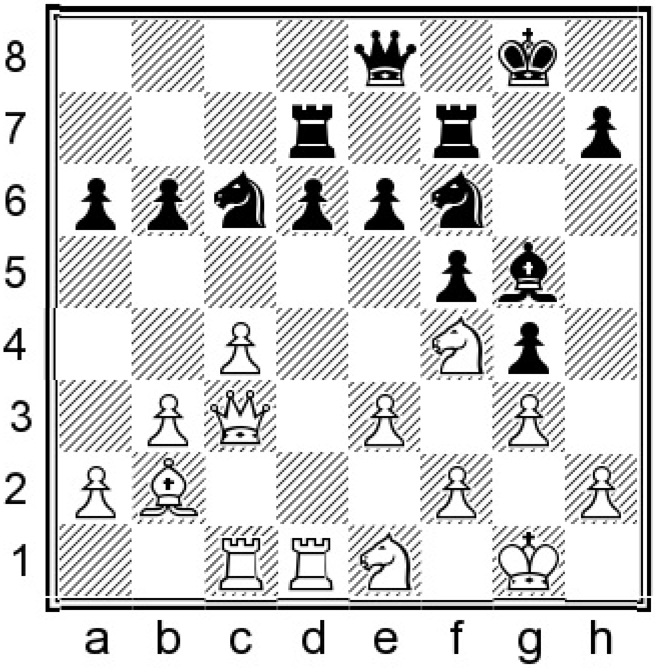
Black defends e6; he could play 24...♘e4 immediately, because the queen sac 25.♘xe6? is wrong.

Carlsen feared it at the board, but lately he couldn't understand why, because after 25...♕e8 26.♘xg5 ♘xd2 27.♘xf7, "as any engine points out, 27...♘e4 28.♘h6+ ♔f8 with the point that 29.♘xf5 ♕f7 wins for Black." Otherwise, the h6-knight is lost.

But at the board, with the tension of the game, as we have seen several times, some things are not as clear as after the game.

25.♕c3

White counters 25...♘e4; Carlsen mentioned the radical 25.♗xf6, preferred by the engines, preventing ...♘e4 forever, but that would be almost impossible if White is trying to gain the advantage. Besides, objectively, "it's hard to see how White can play for an advantage after giving up this bishop." (Carlsen).



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

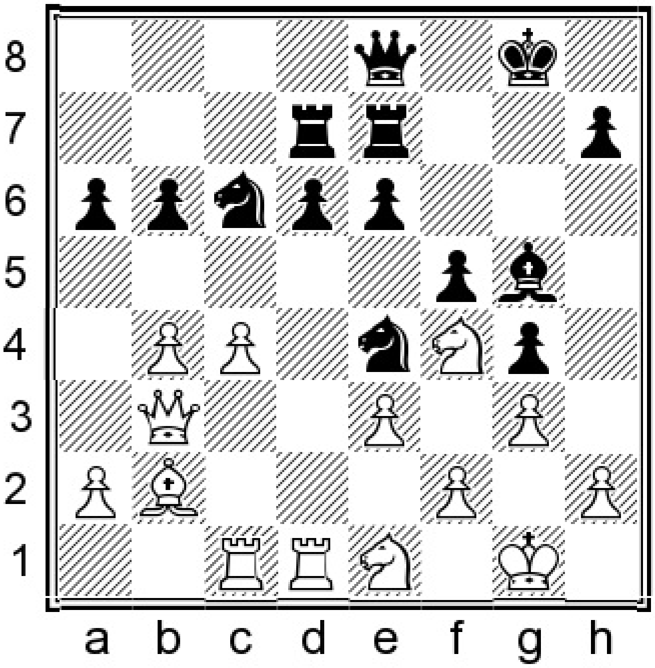
25...♖g7

Black insists on his plan, to play ...♘e4.

The engines like a different way to do it, 25...e5, which maybe is objectively good. However, very few top players would play this unless it is the only option to get the knight to e4. Black wants to move it to e4 for sure, but without giving up the d5 square.

As far as the practical situation was concerned, Carlsen informed us: “I felt that the position was about equal or maybe slightly better for White, but I was rather worried that I would blow it before the time-control, as I only had 17 minutes left here. At the same time, I saw that Kramnik clearly was suffering from a cold and was feeling uncomfortable, which comforted me a little (thinking about my chances in this game that is!).”

26.b4 ♘e4 27.♕b3 ♖ge7



28.♕a4?!

A tempting move. The queen goes to press the apparently weak black queenside, but it is not the best, as Carlsen will show.

In 2008, the best engines liked 28.f3. This is also the initial preference of the engines in 2020, but Carlsen was not impressed. After 28...gxf3 29.♘xf3, he suggested 29...♗f6. The modern engines prefer 29...♖f7, to play ...♗f6 and retake on f6 with the rook, without fearing 30.♘xg5 ♘xg5 because the white king is unsafe.

Carlsen had a better opinion of 28.h4, suggested by Nigel Short during the press-conference after the round. It is “certainly better than the text.” Black would probably answer 28...♗h6, as after 28...♗f6 29.♗xf6 ♘xf6 White takes advantage of the knight retreat by playing 30.c5, with a slight advantage.

After 28.h4 he still evaluated the position as equal or slightly better for White, because although the knight on e4 is a good piece, the f4–knight is good as well. “It’s not easy to take advantage of my weakened king, and not easy to make any clear progress for either side,” he concluded.

Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

28...♘e5!

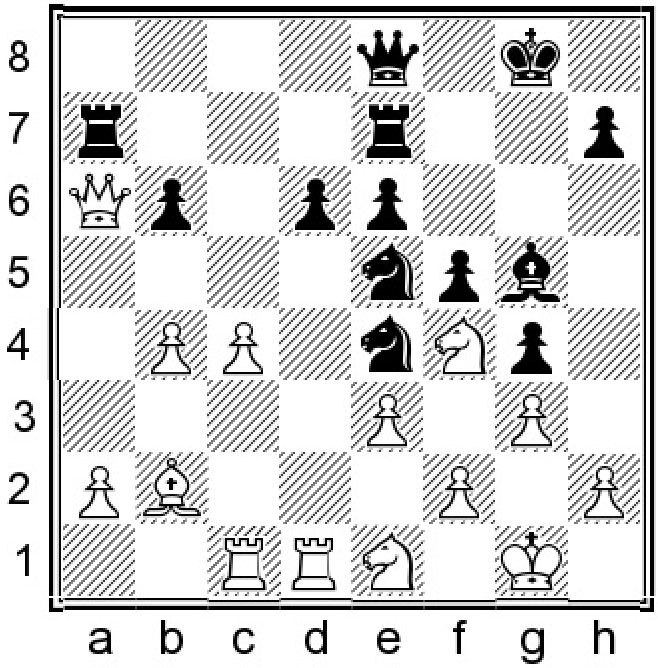
It is not necessary to play 28...♕a8, and certainly not 28...♕c8? 29.♘d5!

29.♕xa6?

29.c5 is well met by 29...♘c4!, or 29...b5! and 30...♘c4!

White still believes in his idea, but he probably committed a tactical mistake. If he had realised what the situation really was, he would have been almost forced to play 29.♕b3, and "after gaining two tempi Black is obviously slightly better, but the white position is certainly playable," said Carlsen. Black could improve his position with moves like 29...♗f6, and then ...a5 without forgetting the possibility of ...h5, while White has no attractive plans.

29...♖a7



30.♕b5

Exercise: 30.♕xb6 was possibly the planned move. Why didn't he play it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because after 30.♕xb6? ♖eb7 31.♕d4 ♗f6!, surprisingly, the white queen gets trapped in the centre.

Let's go to the practical side again. Kramnik accompanied this move with a draw offer. "I was slightly tempted of course, since I would have been happy with a draw before the game, but I realised that my position was so much better that I simply had to decline," said Carlsen.

30...♕xb5 31.cxb5 ♖xa2

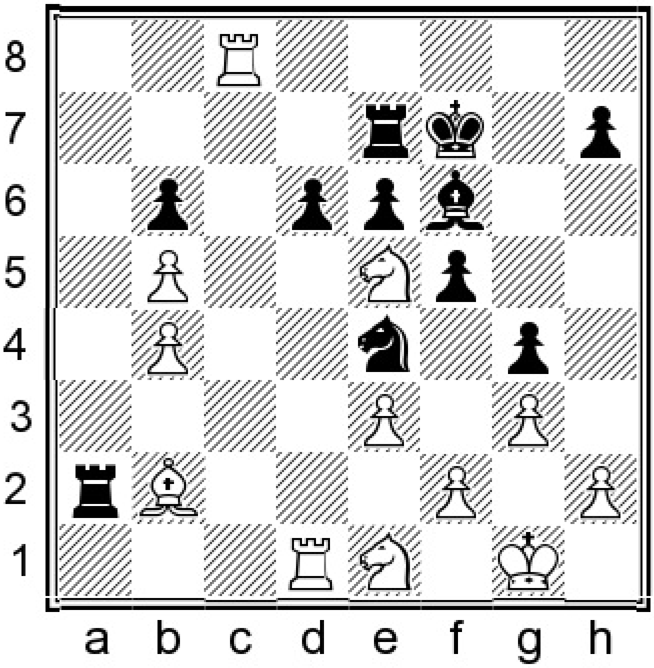
Black has regained his pawn and all his pieces are extremely active.

32.♖c8+ ♔f7 33.♘fd3 ♗f6

A good move, threatening 34...♘xd3, winning. White must also look out for 34...♘f3+

34.♘xe5+

The alternative 34.♗xe5 was no better, as after 34...dxe5 35.♖c6 Black can simply continue 35...♖b7, when White has no constructive moves and is helpless against the coming black moves: 36...♘g5 followed by ...e4 or first ...♘h3+ and then ...e4.



34...dxe5

A good reaction, 34...♗xe5 was even better, as after the exchange of bishops Black gains more squares, such as c3.

Carlsen explained that in time-trouble he was reluctant to allow 35.♗xe5 dxe5 36.♘d3, but Black wins playing 36...♔f6, threatening 37...♖d7. After 37.♖f8+ ♔g7 38.♖d8 (if 38.♖b8 the pin 38...♖d7 wins) 38...♘c3 39.♖f1 (39.♘xe5 ♘xd1 40.♖xd1 loses as well) 39...♖d2!, winning with a second pin.

35.♖c2

A sad retreat, but White cannot activate his forces. The rook, the weakness on f2 and the deadly pins all make themselves felt.

If 35.♘d3 the planned 35...♘g5 is winning, besides, the white weaknesses can also be exploited by the elegant 35...♘xf2!

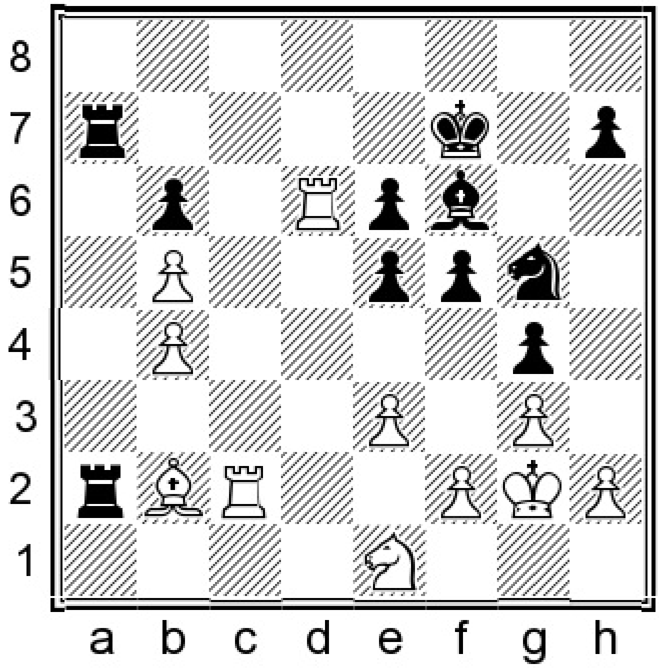
35...♖ea7

Black avoids any tactical chances for White to exploit the undefended situation of his a2-rook, and also prepares the future infiltration of this second rook.

36.♔g2?!

“36.♔f1 was better, the king later headed in this direction anyway.” (Carlsen), but Black has an almost winning positional advantage anyway, as ...♘g5 is always coming.

36...♘g5 37.♖d6?



“This pseudo-active move makes matters much worse for White,” said Carlsen

Exercise (simple): What did he play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

37...e4

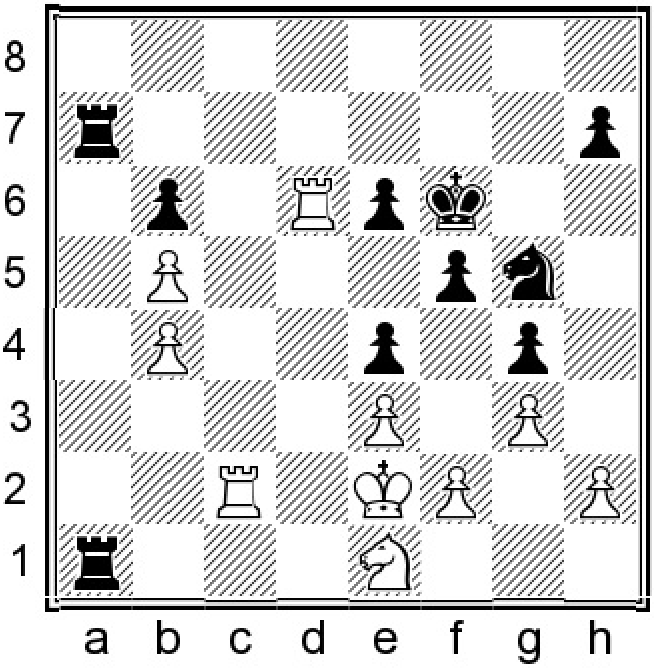
This was an idea we saw before. Black gets rid of the white bishop, who was a good defender.

38.♗xf6 ♔xf6 39.♔f1

If 39.♖xb6 then 39...♖a1 40.♖e2 ♘f3, winning.

39...♖a1 40.♔e2

If 40.♖cd2 then Carlsen indicates one of the several ways to win: 40...♖b1 41.♖d1 ♖xb4 42.♖xb6 ♖b2, which “leaves White defenceless against the threats of ...♖aa2 and ...♘h3.”



40...♖b1

Carlsen said: “I made this move with only some 15 or so seconds left on the clock, but I actually even spent some seconds on ...♖b1, so I wasn’t really worried about losing on time.”

Exercise: This move is good and wins; could you indicate an even stronger possibility?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Black can play 40...♘f3! 41.♘xf3 gxf3+ 42.♔d2, and the weakness of the f2-pawn is decisive. Now Black may continue 42...♖7a3 (preventing ♔c3) 43.♖b2 ♖f1, or 43.♖c1 ♖1a2+ 44.♖c2 ♖xc2+ 45.♔xc2 ♖a2+ 46.♔c3 ♖xf2 47.♖xb6 ♖e2, winning.

41.♖d1

41.♖xb6 loses in many ways, the prettiest being the “computer-like” 41...♖d7!, with the idea of 42...♘f3 and mate. If 42.♖d2 then 42...♖xe1+ 43.♔xe1 ♘f3+.

41...♖xb4 42.♘g2 ♖xb5

Black is obviously winning now, and White might as well have resigned here.

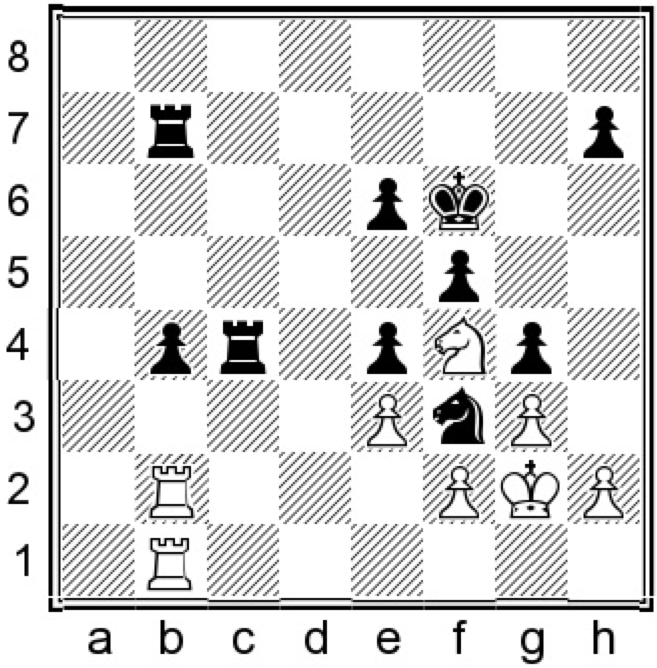
43.♘f4 ♖c5 44.♖b2 b5 45.♔f1 ♖ac7

Black wants to trade a pair of rooks, to ease the advance of his b-pawn.

46.♖bb1

46.♔g2 allows the exchange of a pair of rooks. Carlsen showed a winning line, sacrificing his b-pawn to exploit the irreparable situation of the white king: 46...♖c1 47.♖xc1 ♖xc1 48.♖xb5 ♘f3 49.♘e2 ♖e1 50.♖b2 ♔g5 “and White is completely tied up, he cannot even play h4 due to ...gxh3+ and ...♖xe2. Black will win by playing ...e5 and ...h7–h5–h4.”

46...♖b7 47.♖b4 ♖c4 48.♖b2 b4 49.♖db1 ♘f3 50.♔g2



Exercise: Carlsen said he played now “the last good move” of the game. Which one?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

50...♖d7!

This forces the exchange of one rook and “Chess is easy again.” (Najdorf).

51.h3 e5 52.♘e2 ♖d2 53.hxg4 fxg4 54.♖xd2 ♘xd2 55.♖b2 ♘f3 56.♔f1 b3 57.♔g2 ♖c2

0–1

Carlsen arrived at this game after losing to Anand, so he was not averse to a draw, “which is not an easy task anyway,” as he said. He encountered a surprise in the opening but reacted in one of the best ways.

He got a decent position, came up with a good plan and solved his problems. In the manoeuvring phase he outplayed Kramnik, playing in his opponent’s style. Tactics always appear, and he calculated more accurately to gain a won ending.

With this victory, which was his first over Kramnik, he shared the lead in the tournament and finally shared first place with Levon Aronian.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) You must calculate the risks very well before advancing your pawns when weakening your king position. In this case, it was an excellent decision, part of a healthy plan. (16...♘c7! 17...f5! 18...g5! 19...g4!).

2.) You must always try to secure your strong points in the centre. (20...♗g5! 25...♖g7!).

3.) Sometimes we must admit a mistake and “take back” a move. (*29.♕b3!*).

4.) Dvoretsky continually emphasizes the importance of “prophylactic thinking”. It is useful to ask oneself “What is my opponent intending to play?” (28.♕a4?! 29.♕xa6?).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 4

Yannick Pelletier – Magnus Carlsen

Queen’s Indian Defence [E15]

Biel (6), 26.07.2008

Before this round, Carlsen was not in first place, so he had to play for a win with Black to fight for a victory in the tournament.

1.d4 ♘f6 2.♘f3 e6 3.c4 b6 4.g3 ♗a6 5.b3 ♗b4+ 6.♗d2 ♗e7 7.♗g2 d5

Question: Carlsen was nearly forced to win, so I find his opening choice strange. Isn’t it too quiet?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Not really. Carlsen is not afraid of, or he even likes, playing quiet positions with long manoeuvres if necessary to try to outplay his opponents. We will see that tactics are present even in these “quiet” positions.

8.cxd5 exd5 9.♘c3 0-0 10.0-0 ♗b7 11.♖c1 ♘bd7

Question: I don’t know much about this line, but I think the knight normally goes to a6. Isn’t that right?

Show/Hide Solution

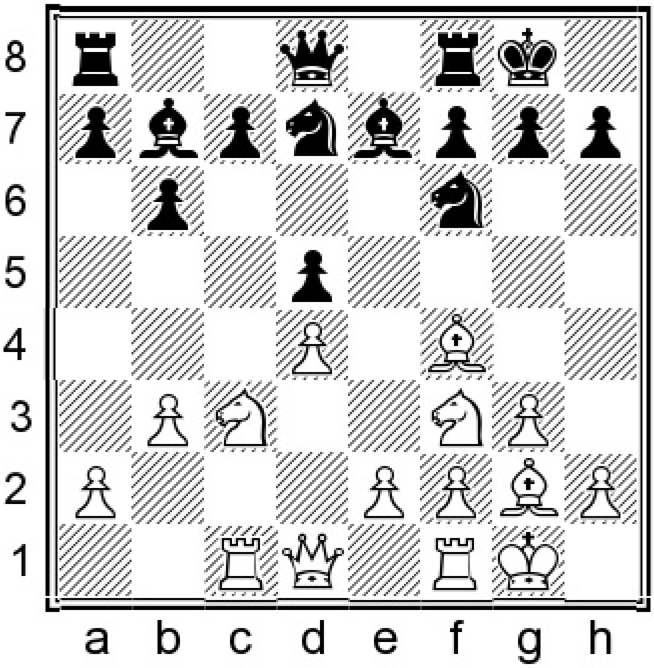
Answer: You are right. Let's see what Carlsen said: "The normal way to treat these positions is to put the knight on a6, from where it can be transferred to e6 via c7 after having played ...c5."

The knight will still usually go to e6, in this case after ...♖e8 and ...♘f8.

The text move was frequently played by the Russian Grandmaster Alexey Vyzmanavin. Carlsen mentioned that it had been played a few weeks earlier by Leko against van Wely in Dortmund.

12.♗f4

The alternative is 12.♘e5.



Exercise: How should Magnus play now? With a plan based on...c6 or on ...c5?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12...c6

Carlsen explained that with the knight on d7 "it is better to put the pawn on c6, because d5 would be weaker than with the knight on a6, and in addition the c7–square would not be covered in case of an eventual ♘b5."

13.♕c2

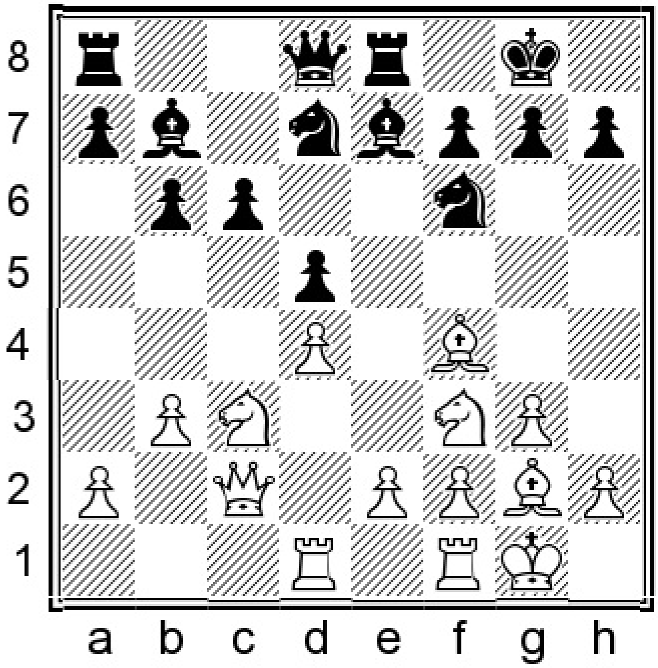
The game mentioned above, Van Wely – Leko, Dortmund 2008, which inspired Carlsen to play this line, continued (13...♖e8) 14.♕b2 ♘f8 15.b4 ♘e6 16.♗e3 ♗d6 17.a4 ♕e7 18.♖b1 a6. Black could reorganize his forces and got a satisfactory game.

13...♖e8 14.♖cd1

Question: First to c1 and now to d1. Why is that?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The idea of this “slightly weird-looking move” (Carlsen), is to play ♘e5, when the rook would be well placed on d1, and to play e4 later. However, Black can easily neutralize it and White will have to change plans.



Exercise: How to neutralize the intended 15.♘e5?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14...♗b4!

Now 15.♘e5 is almost a pawn sacrifice after 15...♘xe5 16.dxe5 ♘g4, while if 16.♗xe5 ♘d7 17.♗f4 then 17...♗xc3 followed by 18...♖xe2 is possible.

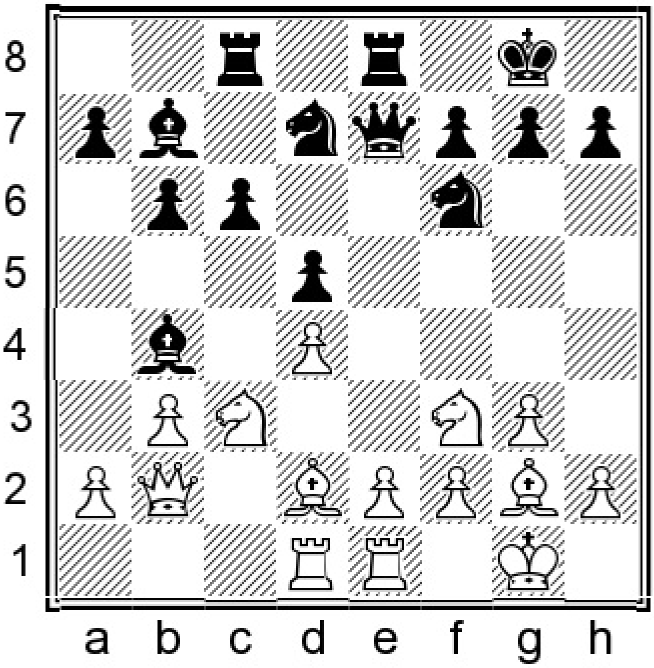
15.♗d2

Question: I see White had to change his plans, as predicted. That looks bad, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen doesn't think so, because "nothing much is happening here anyway, and a tempo loss isn't that serious."

15...♖c8 16.♕b2 ♕e7 17.♖fe1



17...♕f8

Question: This is not the first move that comes to my mind. What is the idea?

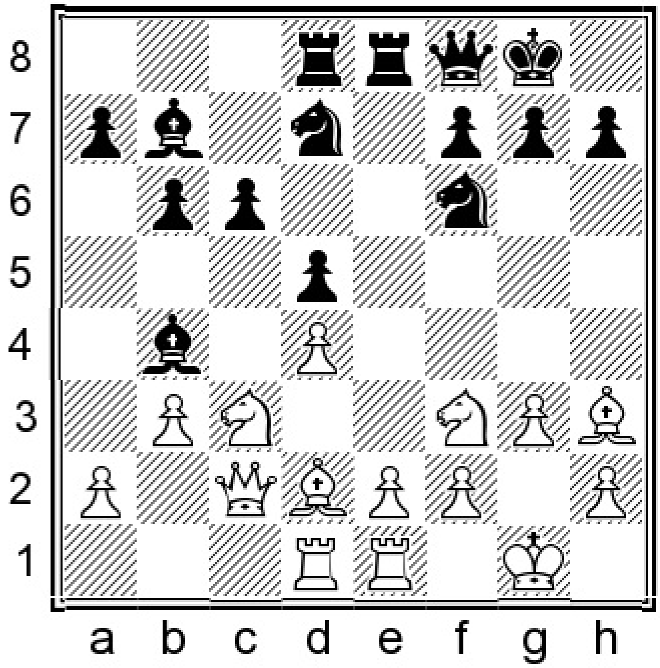
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen agrees with you, and even calls his move "totally unnecessary", because the line e4 with the sequence ...♗xc3 and exd5 hitting the black queen will probably never really be an issue.

But, as we have known since Lasker, the position on the board is not the only important factor when choosing a move. Sometimes the opponent's style, what he likes and how he feels, etc., has an influence on the battle.

So, Carlsen played this "neutral" move because "...my opponent had already consumed a lot of time, and didn't seem to have found a plan. I thought it might be a good idea to just wait and see."

18.♗h3 ♖cd8 19.♕c2



Exercise: What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

19...h6!?

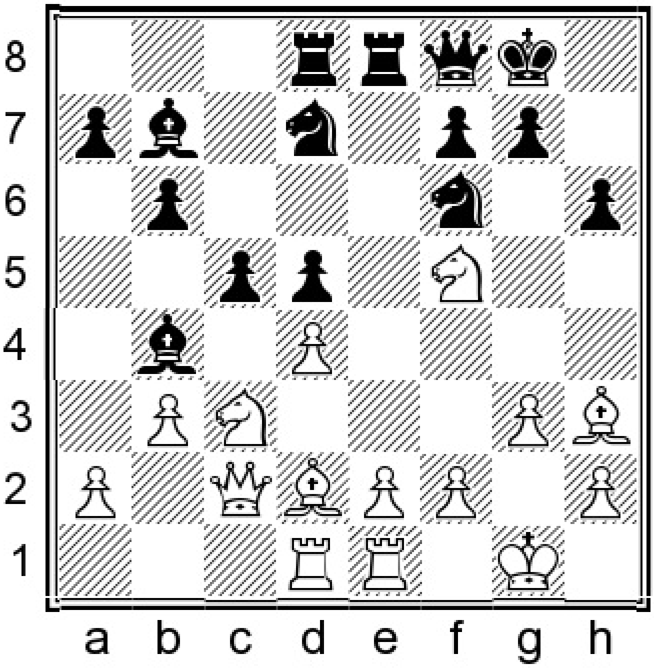
He played a waiting move again, because after the “normal” 19...♘e4 the game could continue 20.♘xe4 dxe4 21.♗xd7 ♖xd7 22.♗xb4 ♕xb4 23.♘e5 ♖xd4 24.♘xc6 ♗xc6 25.♕xc6 ♖ed8 26.♖xd4!, which “is obviously fine for Black,” but not especially promising. “I wanted to keep the pieces on the board,” said Carlsen.

20.♘h4

White plays aggressively. After 19...h6, slightly weakening the kingside, this move is good, but from the practical point of view the move pleased Carlsen, because “this is what I wanted to provoke with my previous move.”

The knight looks nice on f5, but it is not as dangerous as a knight on f5 could be because the other white forces cannot easily help it.

20...c5 21.♘f5



Exercise: There are several possibilities, what did Carlsen choose?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21...a6

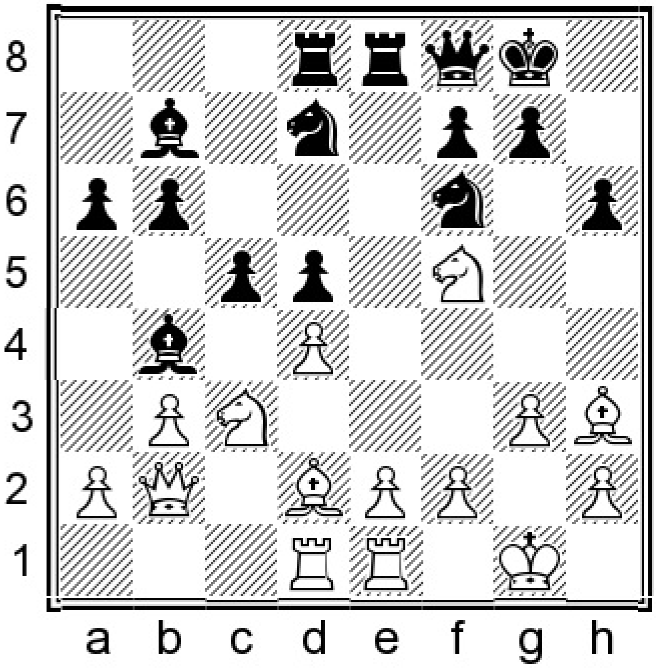
Question: Interesting, first ...h6 and now ...a6...?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It is necessary to consider the opponent’s plans.

“I felt that I had to cover the b5-square, and this certainly felt more natural than the computer suggestion ...♗a6,” said Carlsen in 2008. Notably, in 2020, the engines don’t suggest 21...♗a6 anymore as their first choice, but carefully protect b5 with 21...a6!

22.♕b2



Exercise: It seems there are no more waiting moves, so how should Black continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

22...♗xc3

Carlsen decided “that it was time to ease the pressure,” exchanging pieces. Black has hanging pawns, so exchanging pieces incurs some risk, but Carlsen thought he had enough compensation thanks to his active pieces. Back in 2008 Carlsen mentioned that the best engine of those days suggested 22...cxd4 23.♘xd4 ♘e5, “with nice piece play as compensation for the isolated pawn [which] is probably also fine.”

These days, the engine has an even greater preference for 22...cxd4.

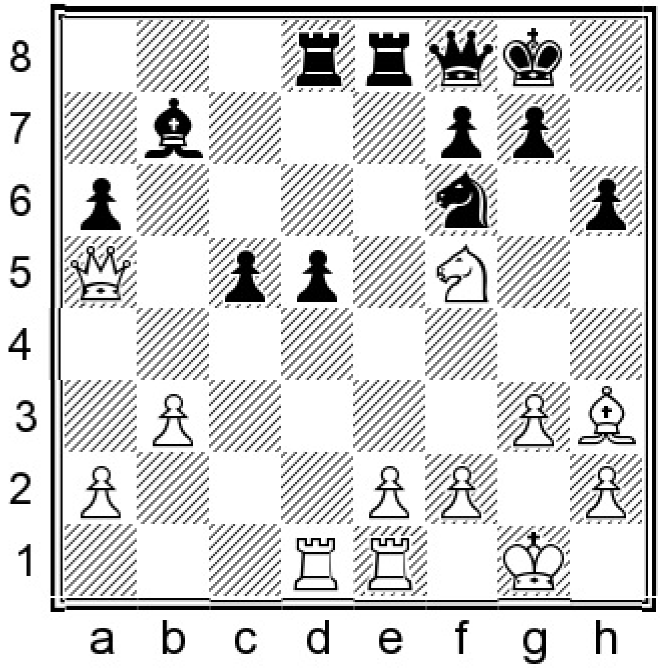
23.♗xc3 ♘e4 24.dxc5?!

This ambitious exchange looks good on the surface. It provokes more simplifications and the queen can quickly reach the queenside. However, as the outcome is not very satisfactory, it is probably no better than the natural 24.♗g2!.

24...♘xc3 25.♕xc3 bxc5 26.♕a5

This is what White liked. The queen looks very active on the queenside, especially seeing as the other queen is on f8.

26...♘f6



“The critical moment in the game.” (Carlsen).

White is active, so let’s find out whether this is the moment to take advantage of the remote location of the black queen.

Exercise: How should White continue?

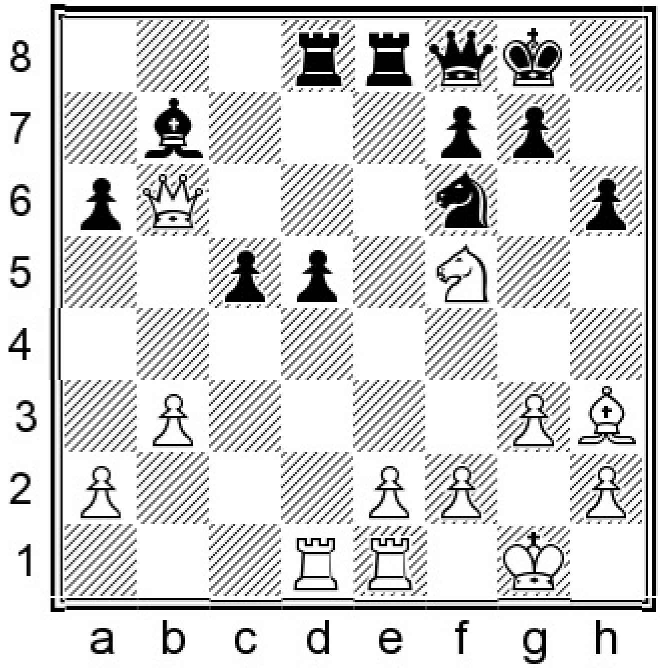
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

27.♕b6?

This looks strong, threatening the bishop and also 28.♘xh6+, but it is deceptive and actually the move is not so strong. Black’s pieces are well situated, and this move “missed a simple tactic,” said Carlsen.

Carlsen said that the continuations 27.♖c1 ♘e4 28.♗g2 ♗c8, or 27.♗g2 ♗c8, “would have led to a normal position, where Black has a weak pawn pair in the centre, but should have sufficient dynamic counterplay, often connected with the ideas of ...d4 and ...♘e4”.



Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

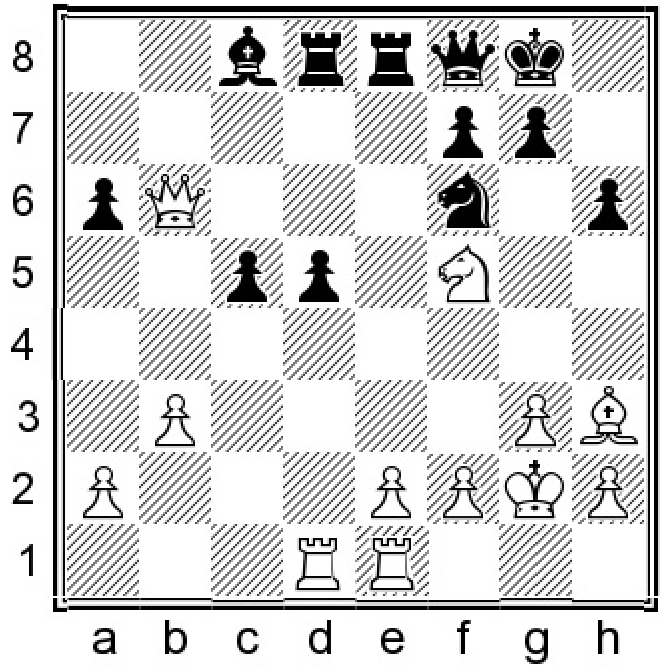
Answer:

27...♗c8!

Without fearing 28.♘xh6+?, because after 28...gxh6 29.♗xc8 there is the intermediate move 29...♖d6! Carlsen thought this is what Pelletier had missed.

28.♔g2

It is amazing that after just one attractive but weak move White's position is already worse. White holds on to his undefended bishop, but his pieces are badly coordinated.



Exercise (simple): How to highlight White’s lack of coordination?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

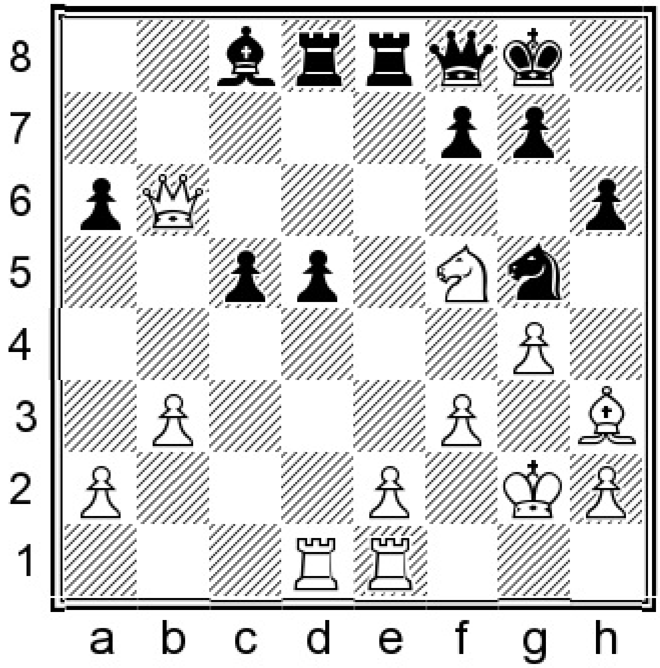
28...♘e4!

Black threatens the strong 29...♘g5, while 29...♘c3 must be considered too.

29.f3 ♘g5

29...♘c3 was also adequate. Carlsen rejected it because after 30.♖d3 (“30.♖d2 d4 with ...♘d5 to come is deadly”) 30...♘xe2 (30...d4 and 30...♘xa2 are also strong) 31.♖e3 ♗xf5 32.♖3xe2 ♖xe2+ 33.♖xe2 ♗d3, he “would ‘only’ be a pawn up,” and he clearly wanted more.

30.g4



There are several good moves. Carlsen played the most effective one.

Exercise: Which move is it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

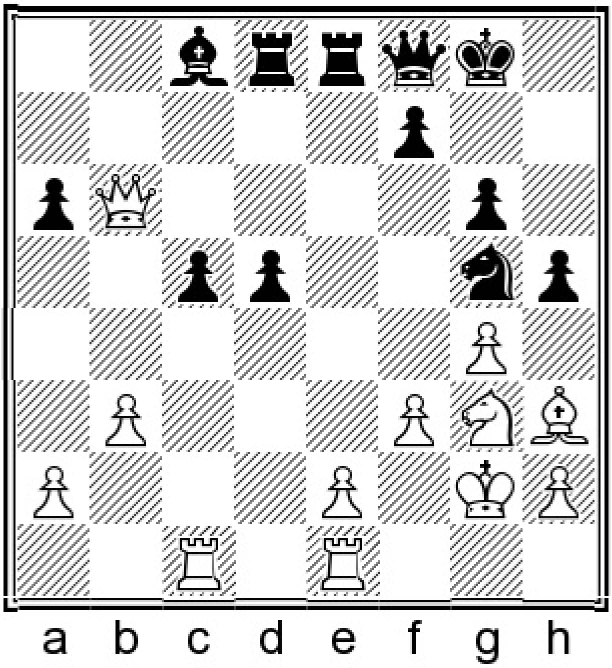
30...h5

The latest engines (June 2020) agree with Carlsen: 30...♘xh3 followed by ...h5 is also good, but the bishop cannot escape.

31.♖c1 g6

Carlsen commented that 31...♘xh3 was more accurate, but there is no difference.

32.♘g3



32...♘xh3

Carlsen's initial intention was to play 32...♕h6, but he disliked the resource 33.♘xh5 ♘xh3 34.♘f6+, although Black is much better too after 34...♔g7 35.♘xe8+ ♖xe8, but again, Carlsen wants a greater advantage.

33.♔xh3 hxg4+ 34.fxg4

34.♔g2 ♕h6 is similar.

34...♕h6+ 35.♔g2 ♗xg4

We have reached the same position that could have arisen after 31...♘xh3 32.♔xh3 hxg4+ 33.fxg4 g6 34.♘g3 ♕h6+ 35.♔g2 ♗xg4.

36.♕xc5

This move is not the most tenacious, but it was very difficult to suggest anything helpful.

36...♖e3

Carlsen placed a question-mark against his move. It is not the strongest one, but it is also winning.

36...♖c8 is an obvious move, "and I tried for a while to find a forced win," said Carlsen, but "unfortunately the right solution 37.♕a3 ♖xe2+! 38.♘xe2 (38.♖xe2 ♖xc1 is winning for Black) 38...♕h3+ 39.♔f2 ♕f3+ 40.♔g1 ♕e3+ 41.♔g2 ♗h3+ with mate never crossed my mind."

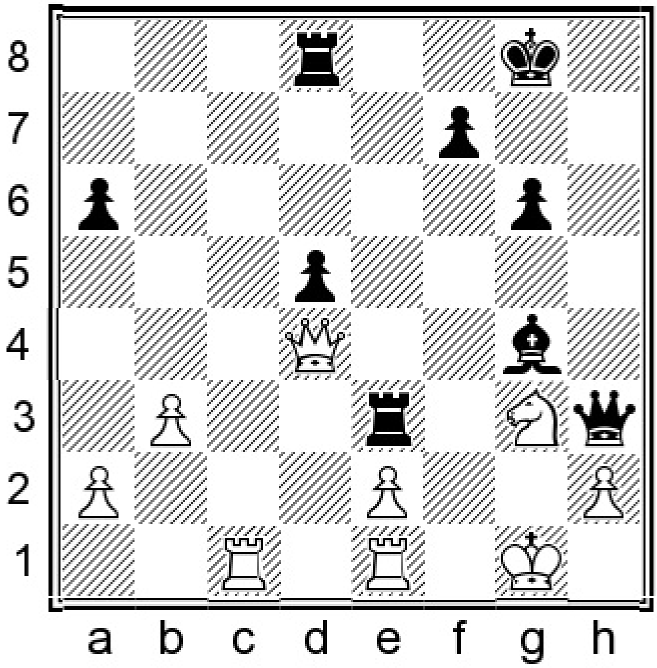
37.♕d4

White was in serious time-trouble. This move allows a quick finish, but anyway 37.♔g1 (which Carlsen considered the best defence) 37...♖c8 38.♕a3 ♖ce8 (38...♕f4! is also strong) "should still give Black a practically winning advantage."

White has too many weaknesses, of which the most important is the king's position. Black could deliver mate in 13 moves according to the engines.

37...♕h3+ 38.♔g1

38.♔f2 ♖de8 is no better.



Exercise: How did Carlsen finish off the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

38...♖xg3+!

Taking advantage of the exposed position of White's king.

39.hxg3 ♕xg3+ 40.♔h1 ♗f5

Pelletier resigned, as 41.♖ed1 is no defence because of 41...♕g5!, protecting d8 and the decisive 42...♗e4+ will now follow, with the d8-rook defended in case of 43.♕xe4.

0–1

Carlsen was in a “must-win” situation. He achieved his goal by maintaining tension in the game, even provoking the opponent into making what seemed like small advances with his moves 19 and 23. White became too excited at what looked like strong infiltration, but Carlsen had calculated better and took the initiative.

Magnus’s advantage increased move by move. The safety of the opponent’s king was key and the game finished through a kingside attack.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Pay close attention to any change in the pawn structure. Even a slight change can have a big effect. (12...c6!).

2.) Hindering the opponent’s plans is just as important as pursuing our own! (14...♗b4! 21...a6!).

3.) Dvoretsky continually emphasizes the importance of “prophylactic thinking”. It is useful to ask oneself “What is my opponent intending to play?” (27.♕b6? *27.♖c1! 27.♗g2!*).

4.) King safety is almost always a key factor in the middlegame. Don’t miss the opportunity to weaken the defences of the opponent’s king. (30...h5!).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Show in Text Mode

Game 5

Ni Hua – Magnus Carlsen

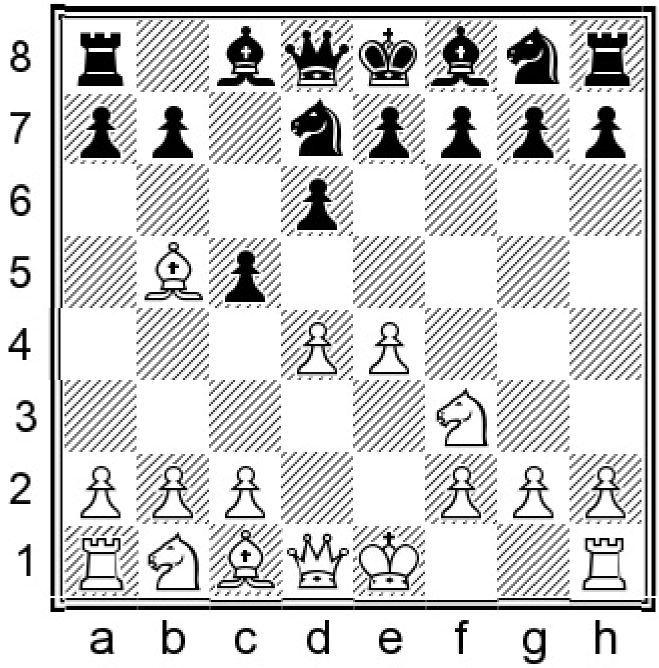
Sicilian Defence [B51]

London Classic (5), 13.12.2009

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.♗b5+ ♘d7

Carlsen is more frequently seen playing with the white pieces in this position, but playing with Black he alternates 3...♗d7 and 3...♘d7.

4.d4



4...a6

Question: This is not the usual reply, is it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: You are right, the more popular answers are 4...♘gf6 and 4...cxd4. Carlsen didn't repeat 4...a6 in the only game he had with Black later (as of July 2020), in Vachier-Lagrave – Carlsen, London 2019. He instead chose 4...cxd4 5.♕xd4 a6. After 6.♗xd7+ he played the unusual 6...♕xd7, and the game continued 7.♘c3 e5 8.♕d3 ♕c6 9.0-0 ♗e6 10.♖d1 ♖c8 11.a4 h6 12.♘d2 ♘f6, reaching later, after ♘d5 and ...♗xd5, a standard position typical of the Boleslavsky Variation among other lines. Carlsen suffered but not because of the opening. It was a draw in 44 moves.

Playing with the white pieces, after 4...cxd4 5.♕xd4 a6 6.♗xd7+ 6...♗xd7, Carlsen played a Maroczy structure with 7.c4. After 7...e5 8.♕d3 b5 9.♘c3 bxc4 10.♕xc4 ♗e6 11.♕d3 h6 12.0-0 ♘f6 13.♖d1 ♗e7 he tried to take advantage of the strong point d5 with 14.♘e1 0-0 15.♘c2 ♕b6 16.♘e3 ♖fc8 17.b3 a5 18.♗d2 ♕a6 19.♗e1, with a slight advantage, Carlsen – Anand, Stavanger 2013, draw in 59 moves.

He later tried 6.♗e2 instead of taking on d7. After 6...♘gf6 7.0-0 e5 8.♕e3 ♘c5, he avoided 9.♘c3 and played 9.♘fd2 instead, trying to obtain a Maroczy structure with 10.c4. Black didn’t allow it with 9...b5?!, but after 10.c4! White was able to open lines and gain strong squares for his minor pieces. The game continued 10...bxc4 11.♘c3 ♗b7 12.♗xc4 with an advantage, Carlsen – Nepomniachtchi, Kolkata 2019, 1–0 in 44 moves.

5.♗xd7+ ♗xd7 6.dxc5 dxc5 7.♘c3

White delays 7.0-0, because 7...♗b5! follows, with fewer problems for Black than in the game.

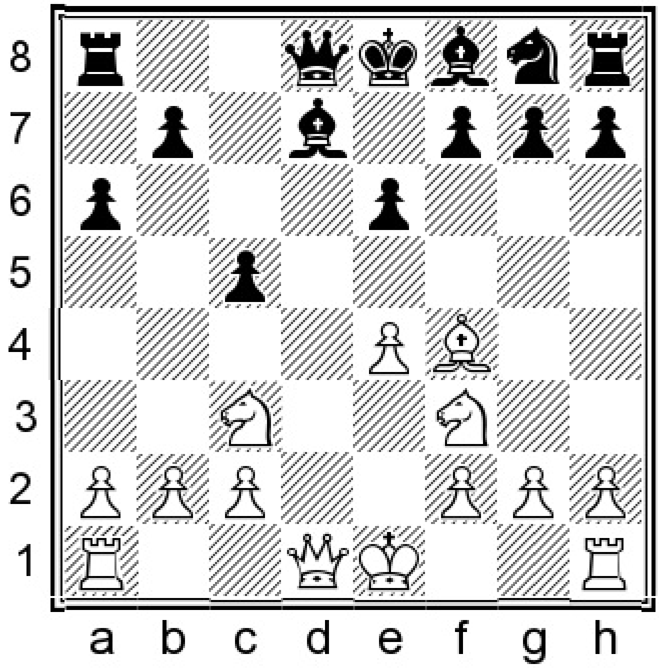
7...e6

As we will see, to exchange queens is generally desirable for Black, because his bishop pair may be enough to equalize and may later even allow him to fight for the advantage, but 7...♗c6 8.♕xd8+ ♖xd8 9.♘e5 was unpleasant for Black in Socko – Bologan, playchess.com 2004. White is ahead in development, while Black has holes on his queenside and will not keep the two bishops.

8.♗f4!

White is ahead in development. He now covers the c7–square, preparing a quick ♖d1.

Exchanging the d7-bishop with 8.♘e5 ♕c7 9.♕xd7+ ♕xd7 10.♘xd7 ♔xd7 has been played, but without success. White’s advantage is insignificant.



Magnus admitted that he was soon in unknown territory for him. He would need to play “with his own little head”, as Najdorf used to say in similar situations.

Exercise: What did he play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

8...♘e7

Not the most natural square, but 8...♘f6 is dubious, as the knight can be advantageously driven away with 9.e5, while 9.♘e5 followed by 10.♕f3 also promises White an advantage.

9.♘e5!

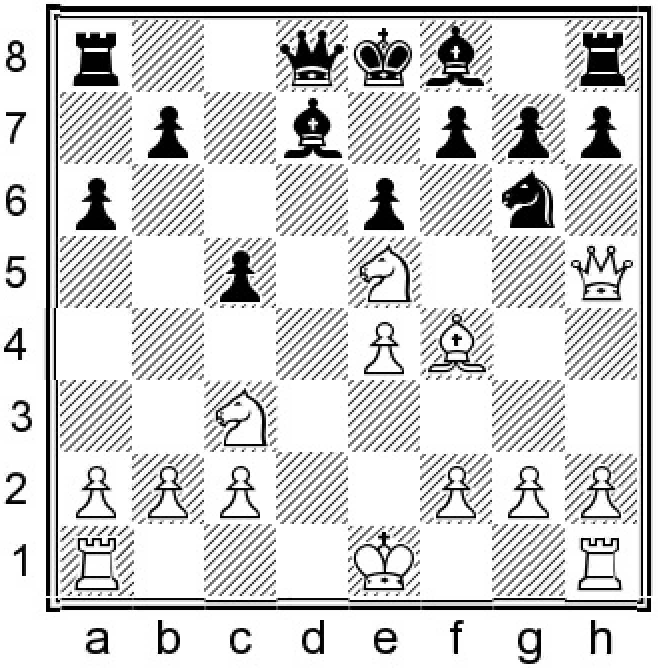
More dangerous than 9.♕e2 ♘g6 10.♗g3 ♗e7 11.h4 h5 12.0-0-0 b5 13.e5?!, played in Hracek – Lutz, Calvia 2004, where Black had the strong 13...♕a5!.

9.♗d6 was also to be considered, but White doesn’t have much after e.g. 9...♕b6 10.♕d2 ♘g6 11.♗xf8 ♖xf8, followed by castling long.

9...♘g6

Better than 9...♗b5?! 10.♕h5 g6?! 11.♕f3 ♘c6 12.♘xc6 (12.♘xb5 axb5 13.♘xc6 bxc6 14.♗e5 was also strong) 12...♗xc6 13.♗e5 ♖g8 14.♖d1 with a clear advantage, though Black managed to draw in Adams – Bu Xianzhi, Yerevan 2008.

10.♕h5!



Carlsen is under pressure and must play accurately to retain his chances of equality.

Exercise: How did Carlsen respond?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

10...♗c6

The best answer. If 10...♘xe5?! "it's hard to find a constructive move for Black after 11.♗xe5 while White can complete his development," said Gawain Jones, e.g. 11...♗c6 12.0-0 ♕a5 13.♖ad1 c4 14.♕g5 ♕c5 15.♖fe1 f6. "This just gives up a pawn but it's hard to suggest a good move." (Jones) 16.♗xf6! ♕xg5 (16...gxf6 17.♕xf6) 17.♗xg5 Brkic – Feletar, Sibenik 2009.

Jones – Bologan, Aix-les-Bains 2011, continued 11...h6 12.h4 (preventing 12...♕g5), 12...♗c6 13.♖d1 ♕a5 14.0-0 c4 15.♘d5!. The previous move prepared this typical piece sacrifice by Jones, who said "Black was threatening ...g6, so this piece sacrifice is forced. I can generate very good play with my large lead in development and Black's king stuck in the centre," 1–0 in 34 moves.

No relief is provided by the queen exchange 10...♕h4 11.♕xh4 ♘xh4 either. Black is undeveloped and White gets strong pressure on the queenside after 12.0-0-0! ♖d8 13.♘c4.

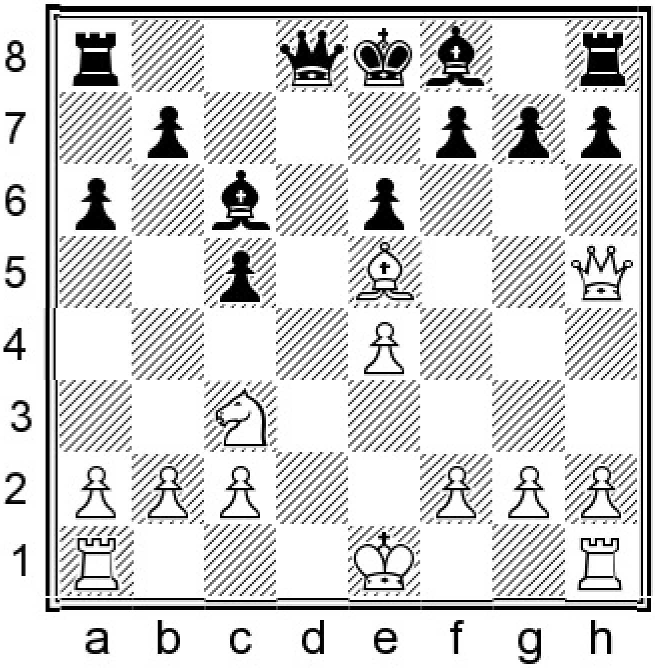
11.♗g3

White renews the threat 12.♘xc6 that would damage the black pawn structure; this is the most ambitious continuation. White could play 11.♘xc6, which, after 11...♘xf4 12.♘xd8 ♘xh5 13.♘xb7 ♖b8 14.♘a5 ♖xb2 15.0-0-0 ♖b8 16.♔d2, leads to a slightly better ending for White.

Several commentators proposed the more solid 11.♘xg6 fxg6 12.♕g4. White is slightly better after 12...♕f6 13.0-0-0 ♗e7 14.h4.

But not 11.♖d1?! ♕f6 12.♘xg6 ♕xg6 and Black has solved all his problems.

11...♘xe5 12.♗xe5



As we saw, Black was slightly worse after practically almost any sensible continuation by White. We have encountered a similar position before, but Black had his bishop on d7, not on c6. This is an improvement for Black, but his problems are not over yet.

Exercise: How to try to maintain the balance?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12...c4!

Black wants to exploit the position of the white queen by playing 13...♕a5, and the f8-bishop has the b4 square, too.

13.0-0 ♕a5

This was the idea. Now Black, exploiting the pin of White’s bishop, wants to continue development with 14...♗e7. Carlsen's view, given in the commentary room, was that most of his problems were over around this point.

14.♕g5 h6

Not 14...f6? 15.♗xf6.

15.♕g3

White decides to continue with pressure on the g7–pawn.

The alternative was the retreat 15.♕f4. Black would hardly want to play 15...f6 due to 16.♗xf6 gxf6 17.♕xf6 ♖h7 18.♕xe6+, with three pawns for the piece and the black king stuck in the centre (albeit not particularly exposed). Anyway, amazingly the engines say Black is fine here.

15...h5 is more "human". After e.g. 16.♖ad1 Black can safely play 16...f6, because now 17.♗xf6? gxf6 18.♕xf6 ♖h6 is bad for White, while if 17.♗c7 then Black is fine playing 17...♕g5.

15...f6!

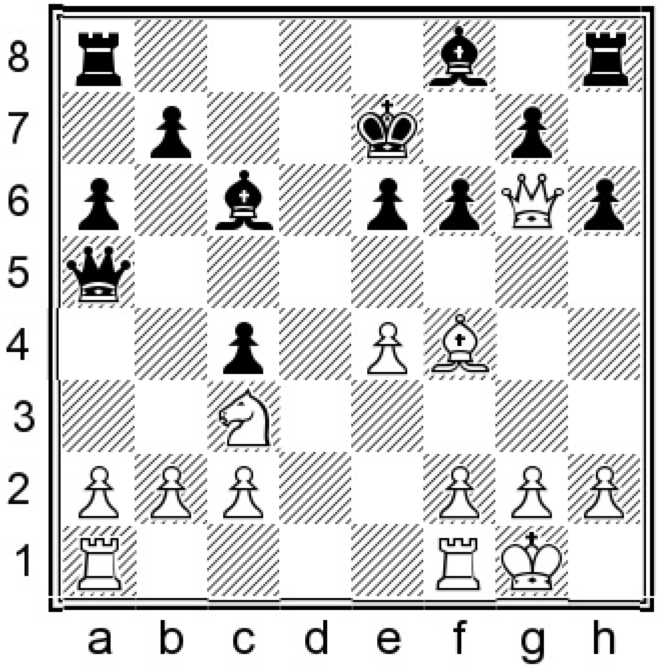
A good move, even allowing the coming check. Black needs to continue development, and the king is not in danger.

16.♕g6+

16.♗c7?! ♕g5 is even more pleasant for Black now.

16...♔e7 17.♗f4

Forced, as 17.♗d4?! allows 17...♕g5! 18.♕xg5 hxg5 followed by ...♔f7, and Black has a promising ending.



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

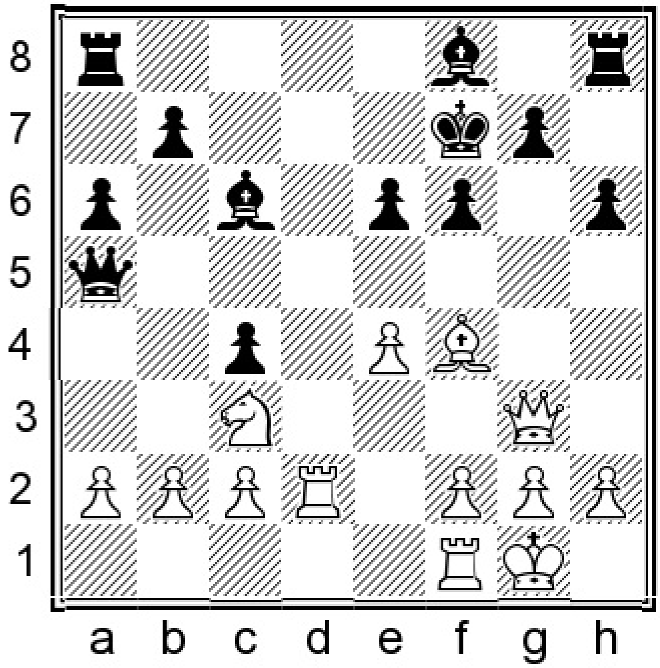
17...♗e8

To improve the position of the king is the priority.

18.♕g3

The queen remains on the kingside. In case White changes plan playing 18.♕g4 ♔f7 19.♕e2, Black is not forced to defend his c4-pawn with 19...b5 or 19...♖c8: he can play 19...♗b4 20.♕xc4 ♗xc3 21.♕xc3 (not 21.bxc3? ♗b5) 21...♕xc3 22.bxc3 ♗a4, with enough compensation, or 19...♗c6 20.♕xc4 ♗b4, followed by 21...♖ac8 and active play.

18...♔f7 19.♖ad1 ♗c6 20.♖d2



White wants to double rooks on the d-file. Magnus thought 20.a3 was better.

Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20...e5!

Carlsen refuses to equalize with 20...♗e7 21.♖fd1 ♖ac8 preventing ♗c7 so that he can play ...♖hd8.

Black wants to play ...♗b4, but the order of moves 20...♗b4 21.♖fd1 e5? is bad due to 22.♖d7+.

Of course, on the chosen path, trying to fight for the advantage, Black loses control of d5.

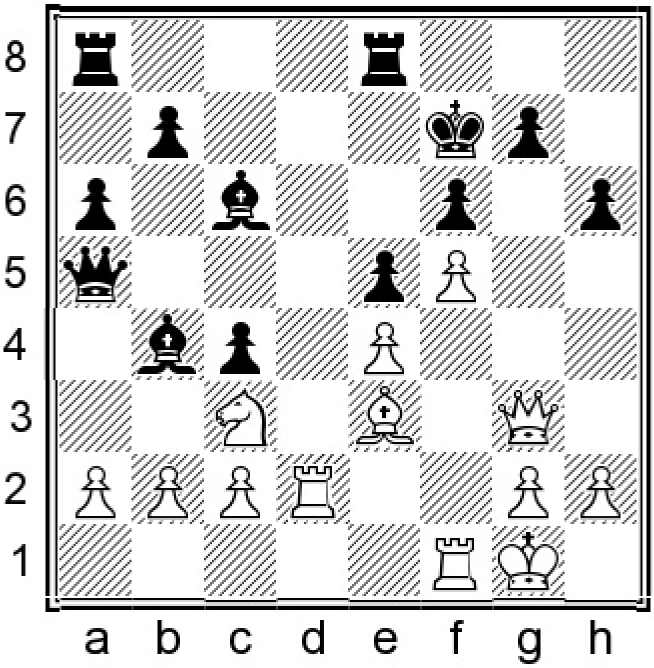
21.♗e3 ♗b4

Black is untangling his pieces. If he can place his king in safety he will have more than a decent position.

22.f4 ♖he8

The engines prefer 22...exf4 23.♖xf4 ♖he8, but even if it is objectively good that is a difficult decision to take at the board: we must be really sure before deciding to open the position of a king situated in the centre. In practical play, to do that would be a bad or at least a dubious decision if there are healthy alternatives.

23.f5



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

23...♗c5!

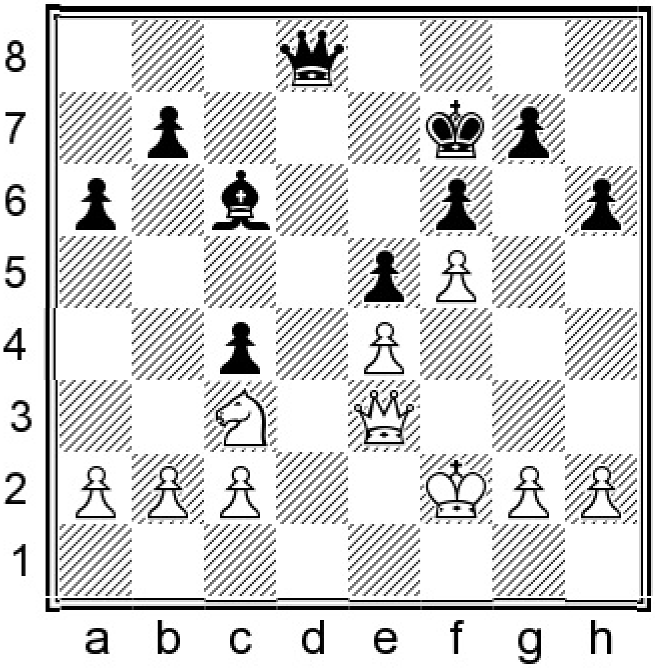
With this exchange Black avoids all combinations based on ♗xh6, and besides he thinks that, after the exchange of bishops, he could profit from several critical dark squares that are now available, such as d4.

A lot of courage and precise calculation is needed to take the offered pawn on c3. To have courage is not enough and tactics don't allow Black to do it: 23...♗xc3? 24.bxc3 ♕xc3 loses to 25.♖d6! (25.♕g6+ ♔g8 26.♗xh6 ♖e7 27.h3 to play ♖f3–g3 is only somewhat better for White) 25...♔g8 (or 25...♖e7 26.♖xf6+! ♔g8 27.♖g6 ♗xe4 28.♖g4! followed by 29.f6) 26.♖xf6 ♖e7 27.♖xh6, followed by f6 again, with a winning attack.

24.♖fd1 ♖ad8 25.♖xd8 ♗xe3+

25...♖xd8?? loses to 26.♕g6+ ♔g8 27.♖xd8+ ♕xd8 28.♗xc5.

26.♕xe3 ♖xd8 27.♖xd8 ♕xd8 28.♔f2



28...♕d6

The ending should finish in a draw. Black's advantage is minimal, but we know that Carlsen will try to play for a win if there is any chance to do it. Both black pieces are more active, e4 and d4 are weak, but White has no problems defending for now.

28...♕d4 gives nothing yet: White can play 29.♔f3, defending e4 and threatening 29...-- 30.♕xd4 exd4 31.♘e2.

29.a3 a5 30.♔f3?!

White's position is healthy, but it is necessary to be alert and not allow Black to begin slightly improving his position, in Carlsen's and Lasker's style. Carlsen said that 30.♔e2 was better, and practically all the commentators agree with him, e.g. after 30...♕d4 White would answer 31.♔f3 again, threatening to exchange queens as before. Then if 31...b5?! 32.♕xd4 exd4 33.♘e2 d3 34.cxd3 cxd3 35.♘c3 Black has problems with his d-pawn, and after 35...b4 36.axb4 axb4 37.♘b1 Black's king is too far to be of help.

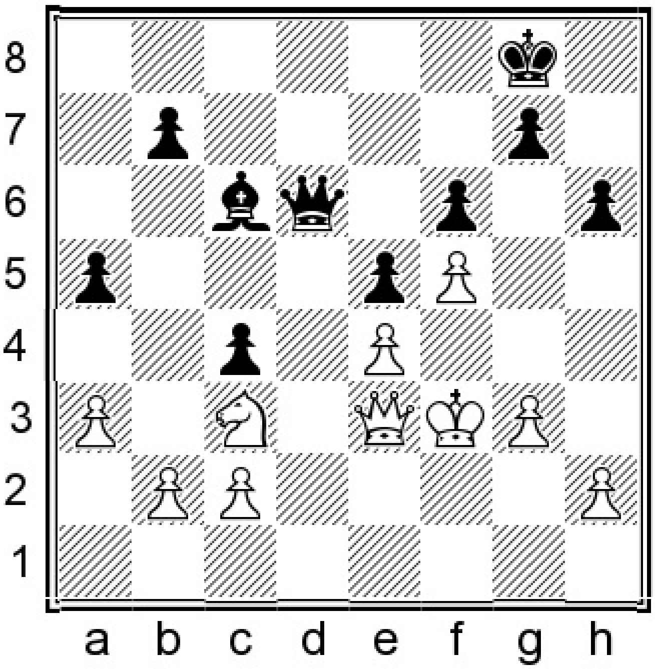
30...♔g8 31.g3?!

"Ni Hua should absolutely undertake prophylactic measures here with 31.♔e2!" said Karsten Mueller.

In case of 31...♔f8 White would improve on 32.♕b6?! ♕d4 33.♕xa5 ♔g8! (threatening 34...♗xe4) and after 34.♕a8+ the h7 square is available for the king. This is better than 33...♗xe4 34.♕a8+ ♔f7 35.♕c8.

White could play 32.♕a7!, without fearing 32...♕d4 33.♕b8+ ♔f7 34.♕c8!

With the king on e2 the expansion 31...b5 is not dangerous either. White would continue 32.♕b6.



Exercise: How did Carlsen highlight the negative side of White’s move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

31...b5!

“Now things become slightly cramped for White as the knight is restricted more and more.” (Mueller). Going back, 30...b5! was more precise than 30...♔g8.

32.♔e2

The king on f3 is a tactical weakness. 32.♕b6?? loses to 32...♗xe4+.

32...b4 33.axb4 axb4 34.♘d1

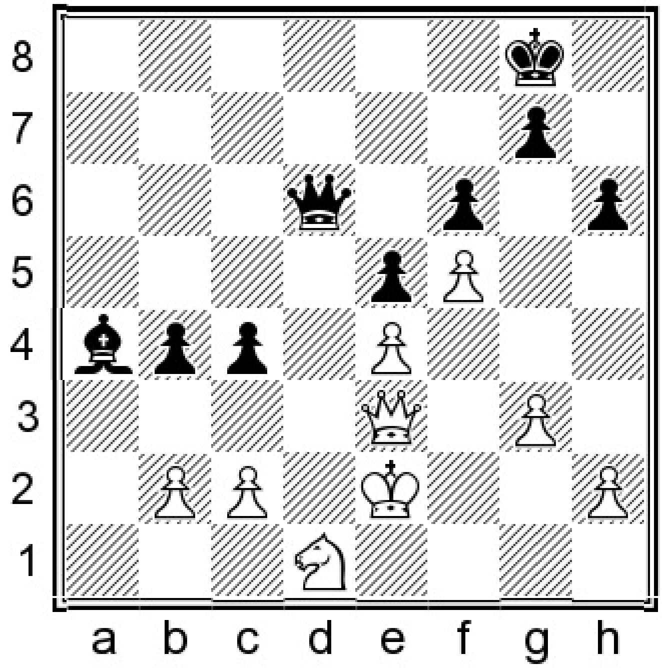
The choice of retreats for the knight was not cheering, White plays the best defence; 34.♘d5? loses to 34...♗xd5 35.♕d2 c3! 36.bxc3 ♗c4+.

If 34.♘a2? Black infiltrates decisively playing 34...♗b7! 35.c3 ♕a6! 36.♘xb4 ♕a1 37.♘d5 ♕xb2+ 38.♔f3 ♕c2.

34...♗a4!

Black continues pressing. 34...♕d4 was not so strong. White could answer 35.c3! ♕xe4 (35...bxc3

36.♘xc3 cements his position) 36.♕xe4 ♗xe4 37.cxb4 ♗xf5 38.b5 ♔f7 39.b6. The c4-pawn is lost and this strong passed pawn is enough to tie down the black pieces and equalize, e.g. 39...♗e4 40.♘e3 ♔e6 41.♘xc4 ♔d7 42.♘a5 followed by b3 to be ready to play ♘c4. Surprisingly, the pawn majority which Black enjoys in the centre is not dangerous without the help of the black king, as the white king and knight can neutralize it.



35.b3?

White finally cracks under the pressure. The opening of the position is certainly in Black's favour, as his bishop is stronger than the knight. "This opens too many routes for Black's attack," said Mueller and suggested the best defensive answer: "Ni Hua absolutely had to try to get some relief by 35.♕d2! ♕d4 36.♕xd4 exd4 37.♔d2 ♗b5 (37...♔f7 38.b3! cxb3 39.cxb3 ♗xb3 40.♘b2 ♔e7 41.♔d3 also holds) 38.c3 dxc3+ 39.bxc3 b3 40.♔e3 ♗e8 41.♔d4 ♗f7 42.e5 fxe5+ 43.♔xe5 because the knight has found a good blockading role here."

35...cxb3 36.cxb3 ♕a6+

Black uses the a-file to enter White's camp.

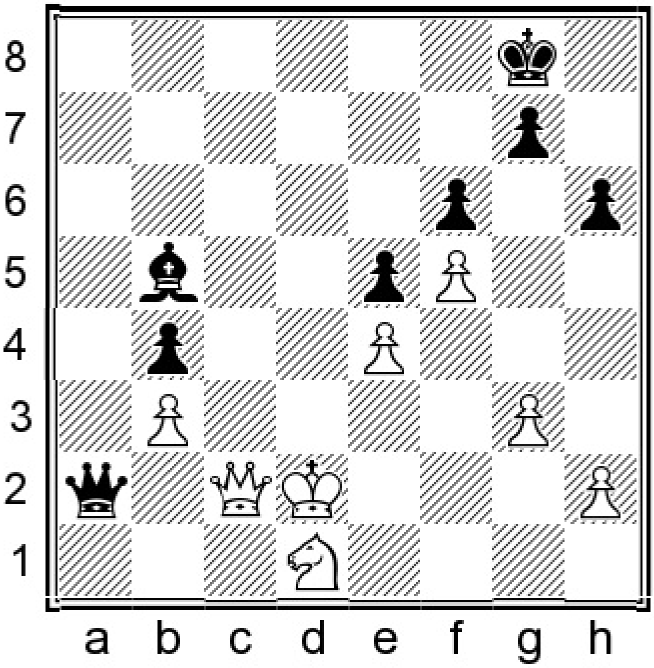
37.♔d2

37.♔e1 is similar, e.g. 37...♗c6 38.g4 ♕a8 39.♘f2 ♕a1+ 40.♔e2 ♗b5+ 41.♔f3 ♕b1, and White is almost in zugzwang. Black has several moves, including ...♕g1, the manoeuvre ...♗e8-f7 or also beginning with ...♔h7 to avoid perpetual checks.

37...♗b5 38.♕c5 ♕a2+ 39.♕c2

There is no salvation either after the alternative 39.♔c1. Black can play 39...♗e2 40.♘e3, and now 40...♔h7. After that, if 41.♕xb4 then 41...♗d3 followed by 42...♕b1+ and ...♗xe4, when all white kingside pawns are weak and Black is winning.

Mueller thinks that 40...♕xb3 41.♕d5+ ♕xd5 42.exd5 (or 42.♘xd5 ♗d3) 42...♔f7 43.♔d2 ♗f3 44.♔d3 ♔e7 45.♔c4 ♔d6 46.♔xb4 ♗xd5 is good enough.



Exercise: How did Carlsen gain a decisive advantage?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

39...♕a7!

There is no defence against the invasion of one flank or the other.

40.♕c8+

Or 40.♔c1 ♕a1+ 41.♕b1 ♕d4 42.♕c2 ♔h7!, avoiding ♕c8 with check, and White is helpless.

40...♔h7 41.♔c1 ♕a1+ 42.♔c2 ♕d4

With this powerful centralization the queen delivers the final blow. The white position falls apart.

0–1

Carlsen got a slightly worse position after the opening. His opponent played well in the first part of the game and the world champion was required to make several accurate moves to avoid reaching a more dubious situation.

Yet he found them and managed to equalize. The game reached an equal ending where a draw was the most probable result, but Carlsen continued pressing, gained a slight edge, and continued to create trouble for his opponent until the latter ceased to defend sufficiently and was finally beaten.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) You must calculate the risks very well before advancing your pawns and weakening your king position. (15...f6! 35.b3?).

2.) In a worse or an unpleasant position, you must be aware of the dangers, play carefully and at the same time try to grab any chance to gain counterplay. (*10...♘xe5?* 12...c4! 23...♗c5!).

3.) You must not voluntarily allow your opponent tactical motifs (30.♔f3? *31.♔e2!*).

4.) “A game of chess, after all, is a fight...” (Lasker). Even in an equal position there are always chances to press the opponent, fight and play for a win. (20...e5! 31...b5! 34...♗a4!).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 6

Alexei Shirov – Magnus Carlsen

Ruy Lopez Berlin Variation [C65]

Biel (7), 26.07.2011

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 ♘f6 4.d3

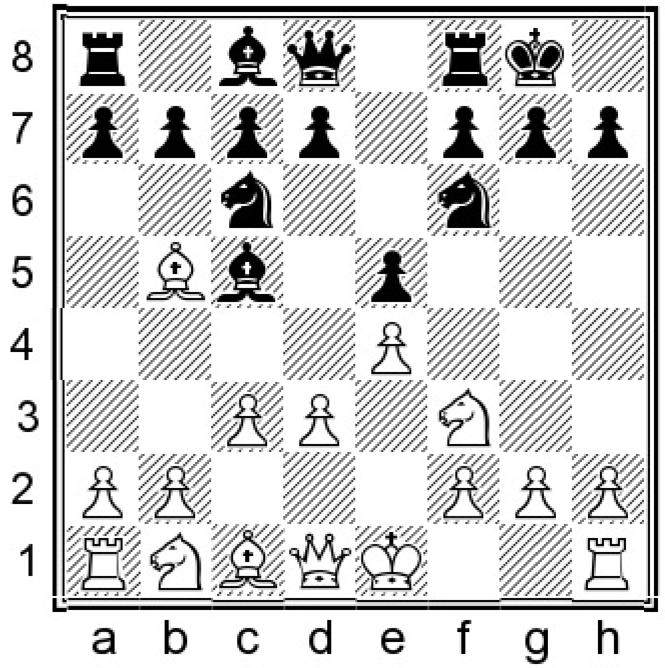
Carlsen commented: “After thinking for a few minutes Shirov decided that he didn’t feel like playing the Berlin endgame that day.”

This comment shows that in those days this move was an “escape route”. Now (2020), it is the main line, more frequently seen than the Berlin endgame.

4...♗c5

Carlsen had played 4...d6 against Ivanchuk in Bazna 2011, “and got a decent position, but a little change never hurts,” he said. His chosen move, 4...♗c5, was his more usual response in the coming years, but he never gave up 4...d6. He even played it in 2020, as we will see in Game 30.

5.c3 0-0



6.♗g5

Question: This move is not the most usual one, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: This move is not the most popular one in 2020, yes, we could call it a secondary line, although Shirov plays it from time to time

Very significantly, this was Carlsen's choice against Karjakin in the 10th game of the World Championship match, New York 2016. He had lost one game, but with his win he equalized the match score. It ended 6-6 and Carlsen won in the tie-break.

6...h6 7.♗h4 ♗e7

"Once the white bishop is on h4 this loss of tempo is considered to be justified," said Carlsen. In this way he neutralizes the pin, and the h4-bishop cannot return to his original diagonal where it could be more active.

The other way to avoid the pin is with 7...g5. Carlsen remembered that "not much had happened in this line since Anand – Topalov, San Luis 2005." Almost the same can be said in 2020, but in 2011 Carlsen "was not particularly interested in finding out what Shirov had prepared there."

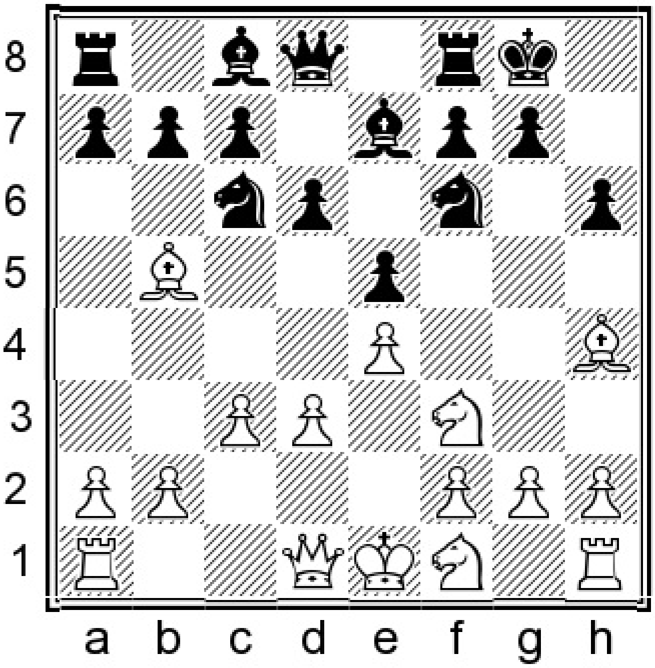
8.♘bd2

Shirov played 8.0-0 in his later games, and Carlsen also castled in that game against Karjakin.

Carlsen explains it is important to note that 8.♗xc6 "doesn't win a pawn due to the standard trick

8...bxc6 9.♘xe5 ♘xe4!”

8...d6 9.♘f1



9...♘b8

Question: Really? This is not the chess I learnt. Is this move good?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Great champions have the ability to recognize situations where general laws don’t apply. Here is Carlsen’s explanation: “Another loss of tempo, but since White has spent a few tempi with the knight, and because of the closed nature of the position, I felt that I could afford to take such liberties. For those interested in alternatives, I refer you to my engine and it’s top choices of: 9...♖b8 and 9...a5.”

Nine years later the engines make more sensible proposals: 9...♘h5 and 9...♗d7.

10.♘e3 ♘g4

Question: Was this the idea of 9...♘b8? It is too deep for me. What is the explanation now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: You are right, this is not the idea of the previous move.

Carlsen said his idea was to play 10...♘bd7 “not in connection with the usual plan of ...♖e8, ...♗f8 and so on, but rather ‘trapping’ the white bishop with ...♘b6,” which looks tempting. 11...♘b6 would be a satisfactory reply to both 11.0-0 and 11.♘f5. But in this position he decided to play the text move (which is the engine’s first option of 2020), because he was not sure about what to do if White doesn’t cooperate and allows his bishop to escape playing 11.♗a4!.

11.♗g3

This was the move Carlsen expected, maintaining the tension. After 11.♗xe7 Black has no problems and the position “would have led to dull equality,” said Carlsen.

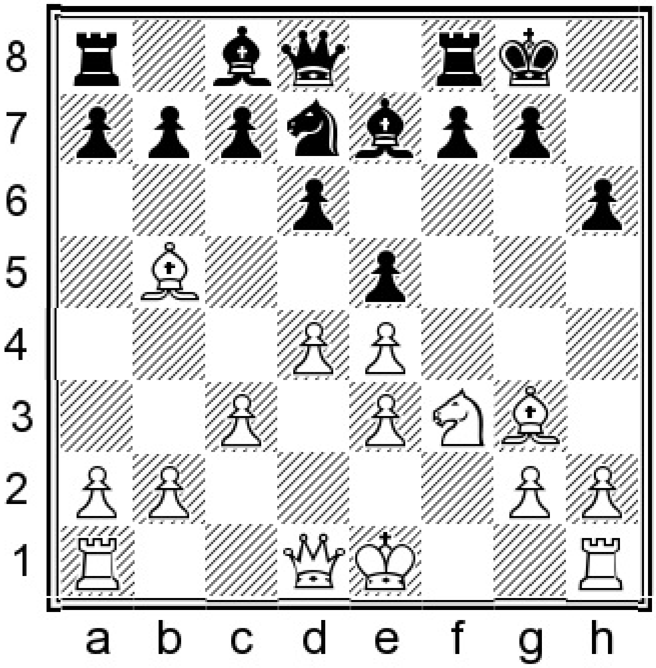
11...♘xe3 12.fxe3 ♘d7

Black continues with his development without chasing away the b5-bishop yet. White will have to move it soon anyway, because it is useless on b5. The knight “threatens” to move to f6 putting pressure on e4.

13.d4

Carlsen said that White’s desire to play this move before Black can play ...♘f6, attacking e4, was understandable, “since Black would have fairly easy play after that.” For example, 13.0-0 ♘f6 and now 14.♗c4 seems the best option. Carlsen in 2011 proposed 14...♗e6 with equality, although now the engines don’t like the doubled pawns and slightly prefer White after 15.♗xe6 fxe6 and now e.g. 16.b4 followed by ♕b3; instead of 14...♗e6 Black can play 14...c6, preparing a future expansion ...b5 and ...a5.

14.♕c2?!, defending e4, is worse, as after 14...a6 15.♗a4 b5 16.♗b3 ♗b7 White can’t play d4 while Black intends ...c5. “White already has to be a little careful, as 17.♘h4 is met by 17...♘xe4.” (Carlsen).



13...♘f6

"This move, starting some concrete play, is maybe not completely sound, but looked too interesting not to go for."

Question: But this is not particularly impressive. It seems a natural move.

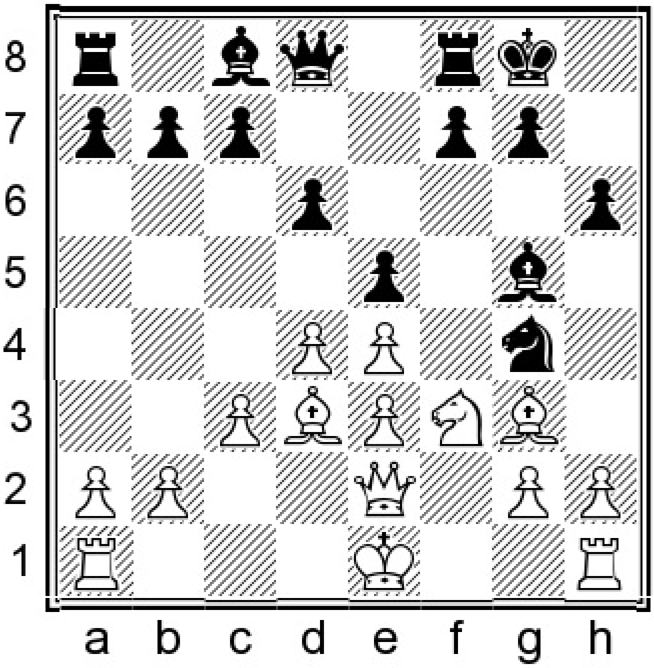
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen said it was the start; he added that there was a solid alternative, 13...♗f6 14.0-0 ♕e7.

14.♗d3 ♘g4

This was the idea. Now the position turns very complex, and this and the next moves are the logical continuation of 13...♘f6, hitting e3.

15.♕e2 ♗g5



16.dxe5

Carlsen was a little surprised to see this, as he thought it would lead to positions where only Black could be better, but it's not really wrong: it could end in a transposition.

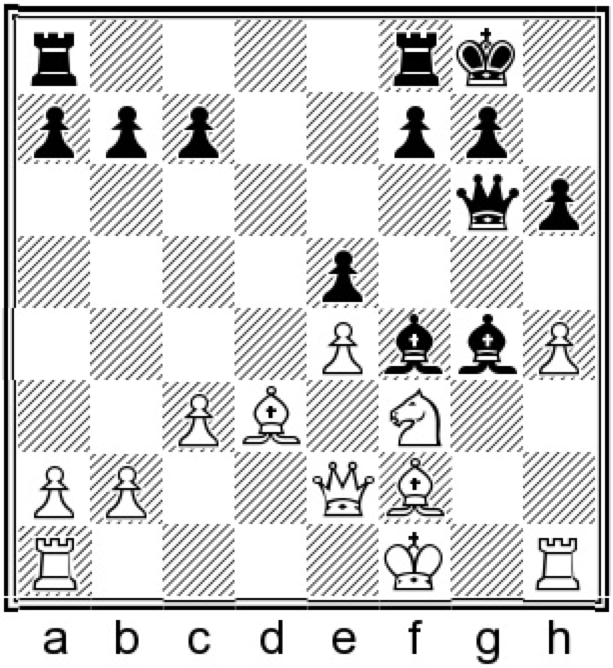
Anyway, the critical move, and fully in Shirov's style, was 16.h3!, which "forces Black to take on e3 and leave his knight stranded."

Question: But why not make a useful move instead of 16.h3?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen pointed out that there are no clearly useful moves. After 16.0-0 the bishop takes on e3 with check. The engines of 2020 agree with Carlsen, 16.h3! is the best move. Carlsen gave interesting lines, and of course after nine years the engines suggest some options that today look slightly better (but no more than that, no missed winning moves). However, being long lines, in a few years' time who knows what they will say.

This is the principal variation: after 16.h3 ♘xe3 17.dxe5 dxe5 18.h4 ♗f4 (better than 18...♘xg2+ 19.♕xg2 ♕xd3 20.hxg5 ♗g4 21.♘xe5 ♕e3+ 22.♔f1 f5 23.gxh6 fxe4+ 24.♗f2, that "leaves Black powerless") 19.♗f2 ♘xg2+ (19...♘g4 20.g3 "wins a piece under much better circumstances for White") 20.♔f1 ♕f6 21.♔xg2 ♕g6+ 22.♔f1 ♗g4.

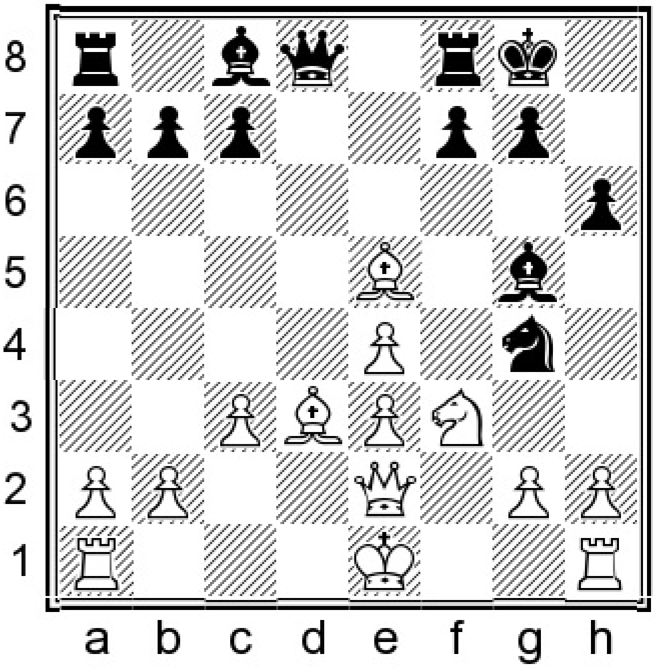


Now comes the divergence; Carlsen liked the "run to safety" with 23.♖g1 ♕h5 24.♖xg4 (the queen offer 24.♘d4? loses to 24...f5!) 24...♕xg4 25.♔e1, but after 25...♖fd8 and doubling of rooks on the d-file the engines prefer Black, by a narrow margin.

So, 23.♗e3 comes as an attempt to improve White's play. If 23...♕h5 then 24.♔f2, while after 23...f5 24.h5 ♕f6 25.♗xf4 exf4 26.e5 White keeps the position closed, and has better chances. There are many possibilities for both sides of course, but 16.h3! would have led to a very complex battle.

16...dxe5 17.♗xe5?!

Shirov accepts the pawn offer. This "betrayal" of his style was the real inaccuracy, 17.h3! ♘xe3 18.h4 ♗f4 19.♗f2 ♘xg2+ 20.♔f1 leads to variations analysed previously.



Exercise: How did Carlsen respond?

Show/Hide Solution

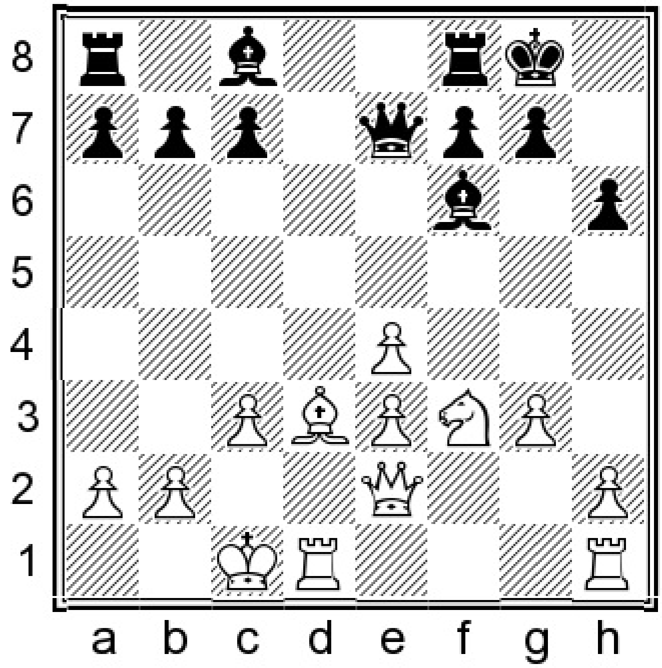
Answer:

17...♗h4+!

“It’s useful to weaken White’s light squares on the kingside and possibly give my light-squared bishop a nice foothold on g4 or h3,” said Carlsen. The move order 17...♘xe5 18.♘xe5 ♗h4+ was also fine. On the other hand, 17...♗xe3?! 18.♗g3!, threatening 19.h3 and castling long in the near future, was good for White.

18.g3 ♘xe5 19.♘xe5 ♗f6 20.♘f3 ♕e7 21.0-0-0

This is the best destination for the king after playing the weakening 18.g3, whereas the alternative 21.0-0 ♗g4 is good for Black.



Black has enough compensation for the pawn and more than one attractive continuation.

Exercise: What would you play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21...c6?!

If 21...♗d7 White has 22.e5!, and after 22...♗xe5 23.♘xe5 ♕xe5 24.♗h7+ followed by 25.♖xd7 and doubling rooks on the d-file, the position is balanced.

Carlsen didn’t like 21...♗g4 because “White can immediately challenge my bishop with 22.h3, this is the key difference between long and short castling, 22...♗xf3 23.♕xf3 and with the bishop coming to c4, White can look to the future with confidence,” he said.

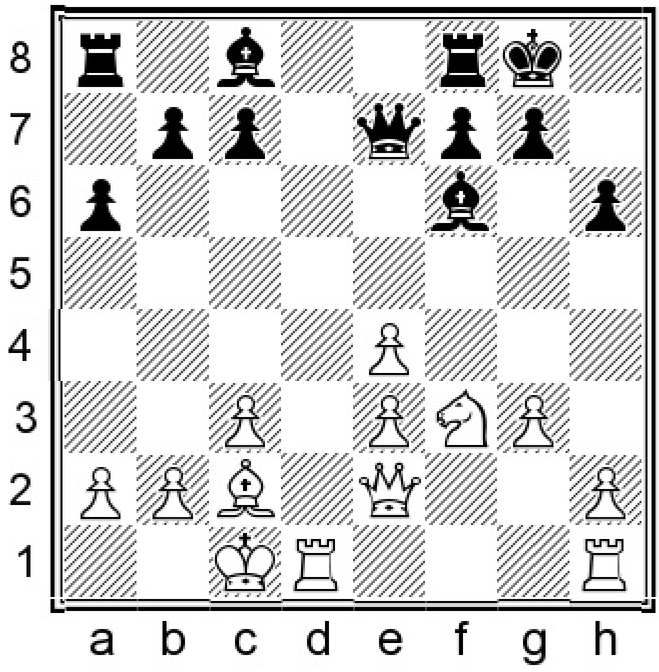
That is of course convincing, but the retreat 22...♗d7 seems better than 22...♗xf3. White could play 23.g4 with a complex position after e.g. 23...♖ad8 24.♖hg1 g6.

We should note that with the pawn on h3 (inserting 21...♗g4 22.h3 ♗d7) the variation indicated in the first line does not work: 23.e5 loses the g3-pawn at the end of the line: 23...♗xe5 24.♘xe5 ♕xe5 25.♗h7+ ♔xh7 26.♖xd7, now 26...♕xg3 is possible.

We must take into account that both kings are situated on opponent flanks, so Carlsen indicated an idea that he only noticed on the next move, 21...a6! preparing an offensive against the castled position.

If 22.♘d4 then 22...c5 23.♘f5 ♗xf5 24.exf5, and now 24...b5! “is the key idea. White cannot activate his bishop, and Black has an easy attack on the queenside,” said Carlsen.

He thought 22.♗c2 was best, but after 22...♖b8! Black has the initiative.



Exercise (easy): Why not play the immediate 22...b5?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because White wins thanks to a double attack after 23.e5! ♗xe5 24.♕d3 g6 25.♕e4.

Here we can see a difference between engines (of 2020) and the human mind. The engines didn't even consider 21...a6, but one of their top choices is 21...♖b8, with similar ideas.

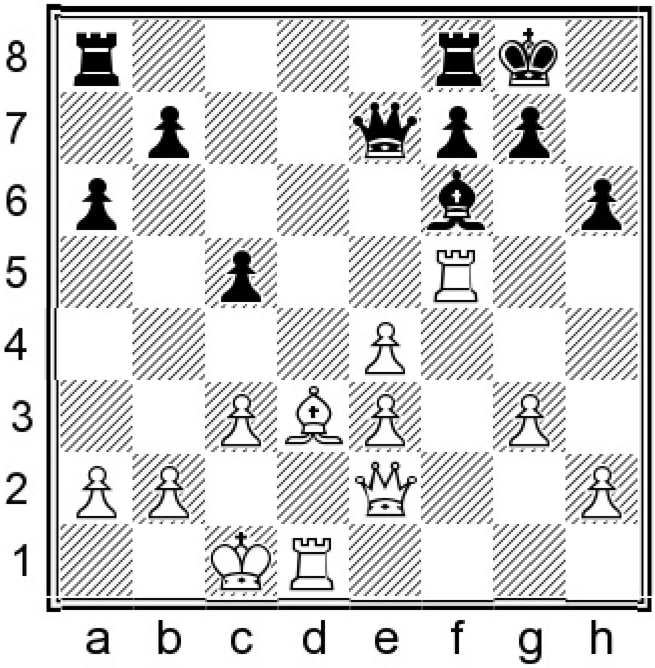
22.♘d4 a6

"Even with the loss of a tempo, this is best," said Carlsen. 22...g6 was his first intention, but then he disliked the line 23.♖hf1 ♗g7 24.♗c4 and due to a little trick White manages to activate his bishop, "which is what I should avoid at any cost. 24...♕xe4 25.♖f4 ♕e7 26.♖df1 and it's clear that Black has wasted too much time." We can try to improve on Black's play with 23...♗h3 24.♖f2 h5, followed by ...♗g7. This seems better, and if 25.♗c4 then 25...♗g4! The engines prefer the first intention of Carlsen, 22...g6.

23.♖hf1 c5

This was the idea, but 23...g6 was still interesting, covering f5, with the manoeuvre ...♗h3 and ...h5 in reserve. White doesn't seem ready to exploit the weaknesses on the black kingside.

24.♘f5 ♗xf5 25.♖xf5



Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

25...b5

And Carlsen executes his plan.

26.♗c2 c4

Question: Now White's bishop will remain passive, so Black is better, right?

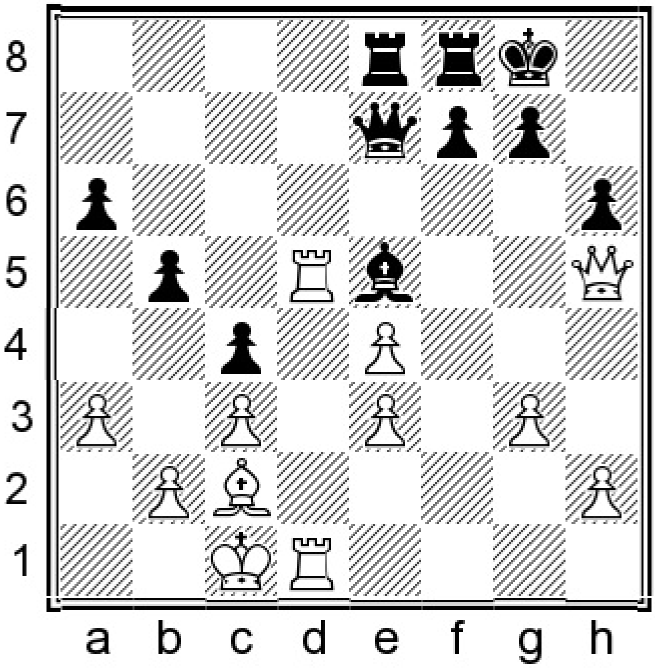
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: With 26...c4 Black completed the idea initiated with 22...a6, and White's bishop will remain passive, as you say, but that is not the only element in the position, as Carlsen explains: "On the other hand, White has activated his rooks, and is after all a pawn up, so the position is probably balanced."

27.♖fd5 ♗e5

"In combination with my next move this move makes a slightly awkward impression. However, I felt that it was very important to cover the d6–square, to keep my queen from being constantly harassed by ♖d7, ♖d6 and so on," said Carlsen. For the engines it is not so awkward, and this is their preferred move. For a human, it may look strange at first sight, but to rule out any chance of White playing e5, freeing his c2-bishop, is attractive.

28.♕h5 ♖ae8 29.a3



White stops the advance ...b4.

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

29...♕a7!

As he explained, he “utilised a simple tactical trick” to put his queen on the b8–square, where it supports the ...a5–b4 break. He could also play 29...♕c7, but in this way he attacks e3. If 30.♖xe5? ♕xe3+ 31.♔b1 g6 White is forced to sacrifice his queen, and after 32.♖xe8 gxh5 33.♖e5 ♕e2, “White has a difficult defensive task ahead, which was obviously not what my opponent was aiming for.” (Carlsen).

Carlsen said, with a little joke, that the obvious sacrifice 29...♗xc3 did not attract him. After 30.bxc3 ♕xa3+ 31.♔d2 b4 32.cxb4 ♕xb4+ 33.♔e2 ♕b2 34.♔d2 ♕b4+ there is no more than a draw. He said: “it did not really tempt me, especially as I only saw it after I had played ...♕a7.”

Carlsen said he was very optimistic at this point. We assume he was thinking of his coming attack.

30.♔d2!

But this next move dispelled his illusions, as he explained: “I had simply missed this idea. By transferring the king to e2 White takes the sting out of the ...a5–b4 idea.”

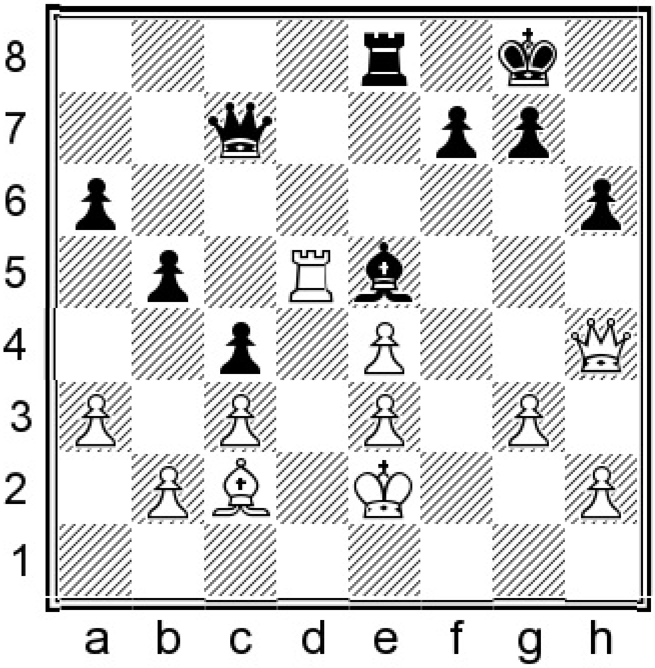
30...♕b8

Carlsen mentioned that it would have been much better to have his h-pawn still on h7, because he would be able to kick White’s queen away with ...g6.

31.♔e2 ♖e6

Black gives some space to his f8-rook.

32.♕h4 ♕b6 33.♖d8 ♖ee8 34.♖xe8 ♖xe8 35.♖d5 ♕c7



36.a4

Question: White’s king is in the centre after all. Is 36.a4 a good move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: First of all, it shows Shirov is playing for a win, too. He is trying to create a weakness on b5.

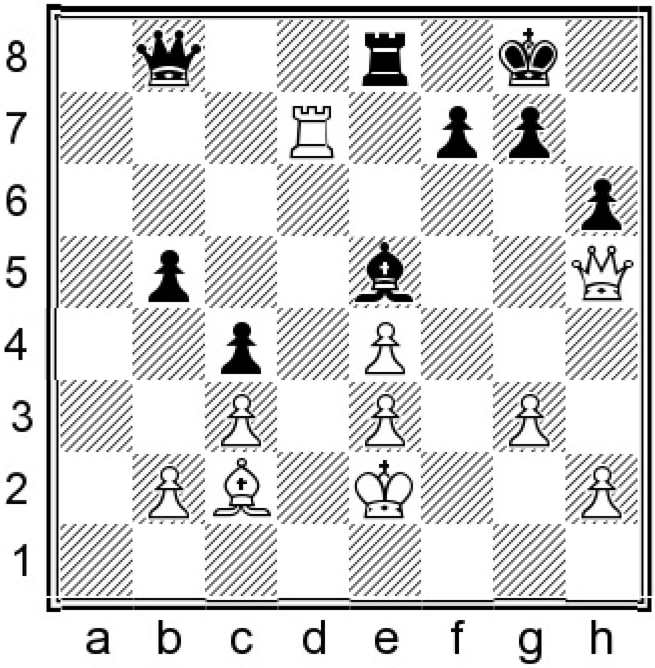
The position is equal. Black has no pieces to disturb White’s king at this moment. White could just sit and wait, and “it’s hard for either side to undertake any active operations,” but Shirov plays “a committal move, but far from a bad one,” as Carlsen said.

36...♕b6 37.axb5 axb5 38.♕h5

White could play 38.♖d7 immediately, and Carlsen said he thought it was the best move, because "It's hard to find a convenient way for Black to avoid the exchange of rooks, when there will not be much left to fight for," e.g. 38...♕e6 39.♖d8 ♔h7 40.♖xe8 ♕xe8, with a probable draw.

Objectivity is one thing, but, if White wanted to force a draw, why would he play 36.a4?

38...♕b8 39.♖d7?!



Carlsen said that Shirov was probably induced into this apparently active move by the fact that they were both short on time here.

Exercise: How did Carlsen show it was a rather optimistic choice for White?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

39...g6!

A move that "is pretty obvious as with the white queen misplaced on the kingside the ...b4–break will grow considerably in strength," said Carlsen.

Now 40.♕xh6 b4 may be objectively playable, but at the board it looks very dangerous for White.

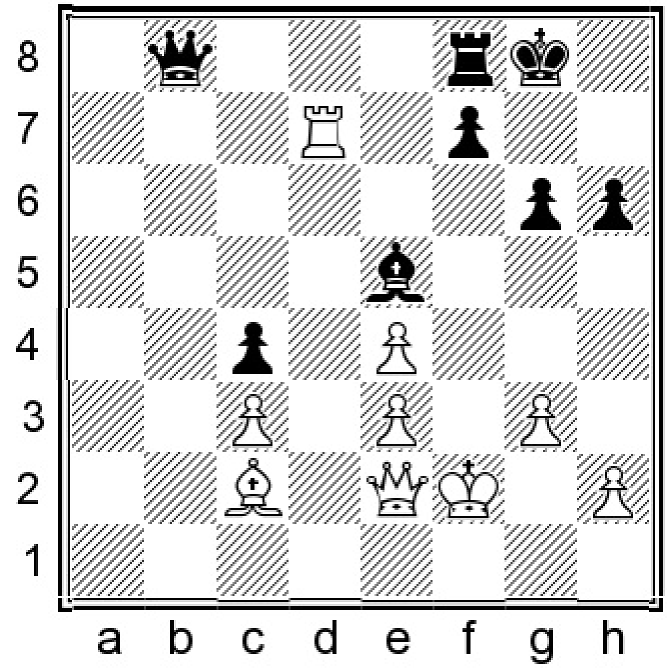
40.♕f3

White answered in a way that stays well within the drawing zone, even though now the move ...b4 is coming.

40...♖f8 41.♔f2

41.♖d5?! doesn’t stop 41...b4! 42.cxb4 ♕xb4! 43.♖xe5 because Black has 43...♕xb2, with a double attack.

41...b4 42.♕e2 bxc3 43.bxc3



Question: As far as I can see, Black is making clear progress. Now he has the b-file to infiltrate. Am I right?

Show/Hide Solution

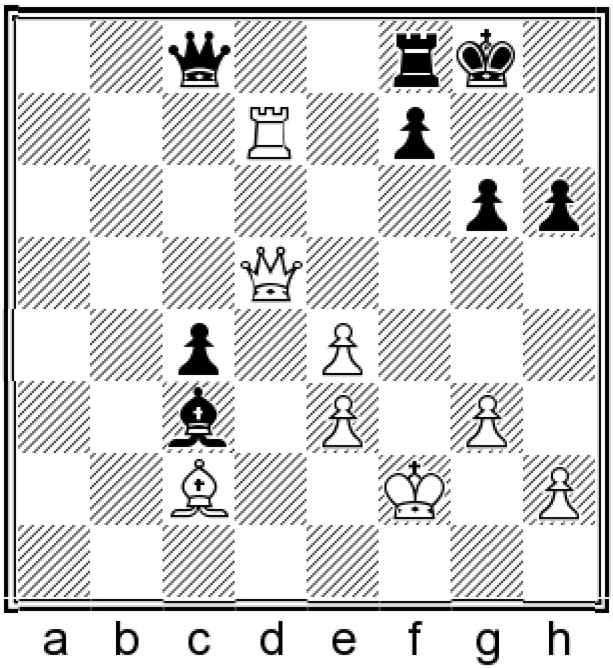
Answer: Black has obtained some things, yes, but not a definitive advantage, as White has his trump cards too: his rook is very active, the queen can be activated too, and White can counterattack on the kingside if Black tries to bring his rook to join the attack. Carlsen gave this line to support such a view:

43...♕b2 44.♗d3! ♕a1 45.♗xc4 ♕h1, and now the most precise defence is the counterattack 46.♕g4! ♕xh2+ 47.♔f3, and there is no win for Black: 47...♕h1+ (if 47...♔g7 White can force perpetual check with 48.♖xf7+! ♖xf7+ 49.♗xf7 ♔xf7 50.♕d7+) 48.♔f2 ♖b8 49.♗xf7+ ♔f8 50.♗b3! (50.♗c4! intending ♗e2 also works), the bishop is safe due to the mate threat, and Black is forced to give perpetual check.

43...♕c8

Another attempt was 43...♕b5, e.g. 44.♖d5 ♕c6. The bishop is untouchable due to 45...♕f6+, but 45.♗a4 ♕xa4 46.♖xe5, although slightly unpleasant, seems to hold.

44.♕d2 ♗xc3 45.♕d5



45...♕a6

Carlsen saw that this would lead to a draw more or less by force, but he played it because there was nothing better anyway.

45...♗g7 46.e5 c3 47.♔g2 “and White is too active for Black to hope for anything real,” says Carlsen. The advance e6 is always a threat; we could try 45...♗e5 avoiding e5, but what next?

46.e5?

White avoids 46...♕f6+ and frees his bishop. The move looks attractive and allows him to continue thinking about attack, maybe with the advance e6 at some point. However, we will immediately see that this was the moment to think primarily about defence.

46.♗d1! was the best chance to maintain equality, planning ♗e2, as Carlsen showed: 46...♕f6+ 47.♔g2 ♖b8 (or 47...♖c8 48.♗e2 ♕e6 49.♖d8+ ♖xd8 50.♕xd8+ ♔g7 51.♕d5, recovering the pawn) 48.♕xc4 ♖b2+ 49.♗e2 ♗e1 50.♔h3, “and Black has nothing as 50...♕f2? even loses: 51.♖d8+ ♔h7 52.♕d4” (Carlsen).

Exercise: How did Carlsen punish White’s mistake?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

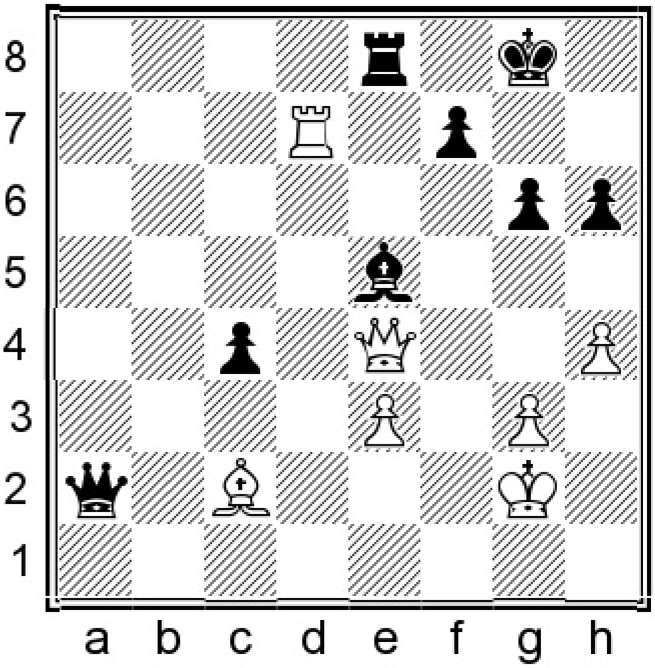
46...♕a2!

As simple as it is strong; thanks to this attack, Black wins a pawn.

47.♕e4 ♗xe5

"Now it's very difficult for White," said Carlsen. White is lost according to the engines, but the opposite-coloured bishops still give White practical chances.

48.h4 ♖e8 49.♔g2



Exercise: Carlsen played here the strongest move "by elimination after a long period of thought." What did he play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

49...h5!

A very strong "quiet" move. Black stops all counterplay based on h5 or g4 followed by h5, and White is defenceless. The first impulse is to attack as quickly as possible, so Carlsen analysed the position during a long period of thought.

49...♖e6 was his first option, but after 50.♖d8+ ♔g7 he finally disliked 51.♖a8! (he looked deeply at 51.♖d7, analysing till move 58, but it is worse) 51...♕b2 52.♕xc4, and he thought Black is only slightly better; in 2020 the engines believe Black is much better, but how to be sure of this?

49...♕a8 was another option, “but I didn’t like 50.♖b7 when my queen is clearly misplaced,” said Carlsen. The engines of today even like to play 50.h5 first, without fearing the exchange of queens.

50.♔h3

“Now the rest is fairly easy,” said Carlsen. The move he had to calculate was 50.g4, trying to get counterchances before Black could organize an attack.

The engines of 2020 think that 50...♖e6 is the best move, based on 51.gxh5? ♗f6, winning. However, they also approve of Carlsen’s calculation, though it is not an easy move to make: 50...hxg4 51.h5 ♕a8 52.hxg6 fxg6! 53.♖b7 (or 53.♖d5 ♗g7 54.♕xc4 ♖c8 and the pins work out in Black’s favour, 55.♕b3 ♖xc2+ 56.♔g1 ♕a2, winning) 53...♔f8! with ...♖e7 to come, and Black is winning.

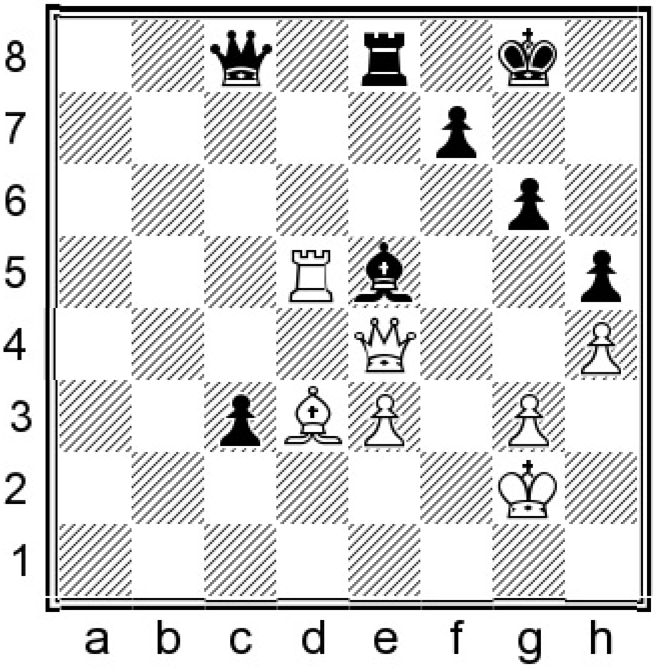
50...c3 51.♖d5 ♕a6

“The cleanest way.” With this nice move the queen returns to the centre of the fight, threatening to enter White’s camp because 52.♖xe5 ♕f1+ 53.♔h2 ♖xe5 54.♕xe5 ♕f2+ 55.♔h3 ♕xc2 is easily winning for Black.

52.♗d3

Preventing the entry on e2, but White has too many weaknesses.

52...♕c8+ 53.♔g2



53...♗g7

Question: This is surprising, why not 53...♗xg3?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen explained that 53...♗xg3 was "playable of course, but in the interest of king safety I did not want to remove the bishop from the long diagonal."

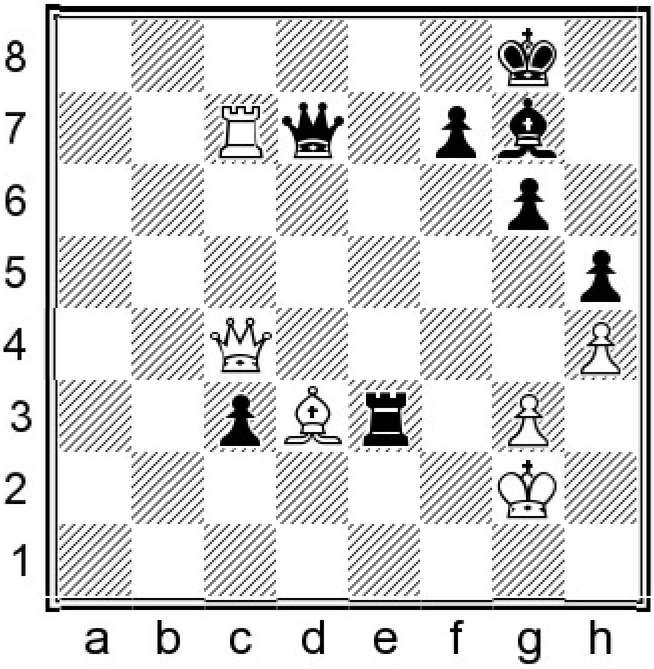
But he added that he had not seen his opponent's reply and he thought Shirov would resign after the text. It seems the e3 pawn is lost because White cannot allow 54...c2.

54.♖c5 ♕d7 55.♕c4

"55.♕d5 ♕xd5+ 56.♖xd5 ♖xe3 would have prolonged the fight, but not by any means changed the result." (Carlsen).

55...♖xe3 56.♖c7

If 56.♗xg6 then 56...♗e5 wins. After 57.♖d5 both 57...♕e6 and 57...♕b7 are strong enough. Carlsen also mentioned 57...♖xg3+ 58.♔f2 ♕a7+, which is much better, and, of course, very easy for the engines to find, but not so much for humans: as Carlsen said, "such 'long' moves are hard to spot". Botvinnik said the same, as we know.



Exercise: How did Carlsen finish off the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

56...♖xg3+

It seems obvious. Yet it is amazing that the engines rate the queen sacrifice 56...♕xc7 as equally strong.

57.♔xg3

If 57.♔f2 then 57...♗d4+ 58.♔xg3 ♕g4+ would transpose to the game.

57...♗e5+ 58.♔f2 ♕xc7 59.♕xc7 ♗xc7 60.♔f3

"Shirov made the time-control with 1 second left, but understandably decided not to continue the fight." (Carlsen).

0–1

Carlsen defined this game as "quite typical for the Biel tournament: interesting, fighting, and far from faultless."

It was a tense fight. Both players played for a win, the game was level almost all the way, but first Shirov and then Carlsen pushed hard to try to gain an advantage, with a lot of ingenuity.

It would have finished in a draw, but White pressed too hard and allowed Carlsen to have better chances. It was only a slight edge, but White didn't sense when the moment to play for a draw had arrived. He made a mistake and it was Carlsen who finally won by attack.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) You must calculate the risks very well before stalling on development. Only in some positions is it possible to do so without being punished. (9...♘b8!).

2.) Sometimes you don't have a choice; you must enter tactical complications whether you like it or not. (*17.h3!*).

3.) Don't miss the opportunity to weaken your opponent's king. (17...♗h4+!).

4.) King safety is often a decisive factor. (30.♔d2! 41...b4!).

5.) Opposite-coloured bishops give theoretical and/or practical chances, both for attack and defence (*46.♗d1! 53...♗xg3!*).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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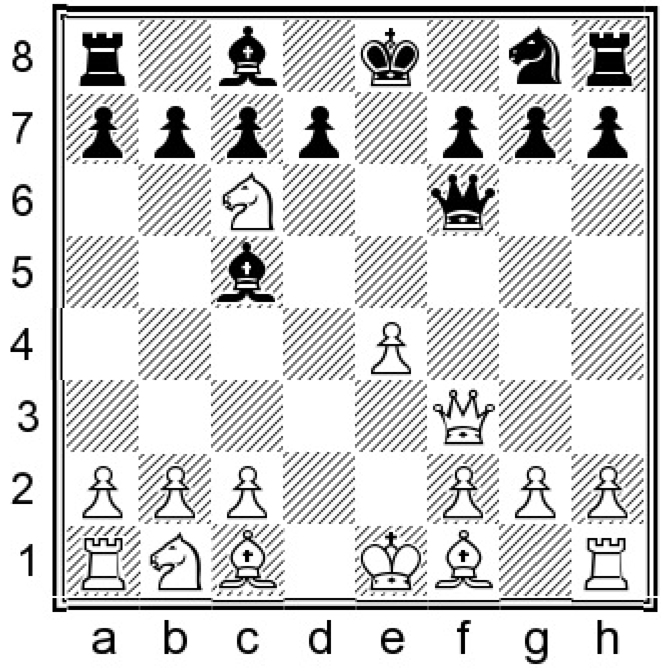
Game 7

Teimour Radjabov – Magnus Carlsen

Scotch Opening [C45]

Tal Memorial, Moscow (5), 13.06.2012

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 exd4 4.♘xd4 ♗c5 5.♘xc6 ♕f6 6.♕f3



White proposes the exchange of queens without fearing the resulting doubled pawns, as they are not a weakness in this position. The main alternative is 6.♕d2 played by Kasparov in his match against Short in London 1993.

6...bxc6

It's curious that some seven or eight years ago, according to the engines this was the weakest of the four options Black has, whereas now (2020) it is their preferred one.

7.♕g3

7.♘d2 and 7.♘c3 are the alternatives; this move was tried several times in the Rublevsky vs. Grischuk Candidates match, Elista 2007.

7...d6

In the three games of that match where this position occurred, Grischuk played 7...h5, whereas Carlsen prefers a quieter continuation.

8.♘c3 ♕g6

The queen cedes her place to the g8-knight, considering it will be more active on f6 than on e7.

9.♗d3 ♘f6 10.♘a4

White gains the two bishops, which is fine, but not an advantage, as the position is not open and the exchange on b6 improves Black's pawn structure.

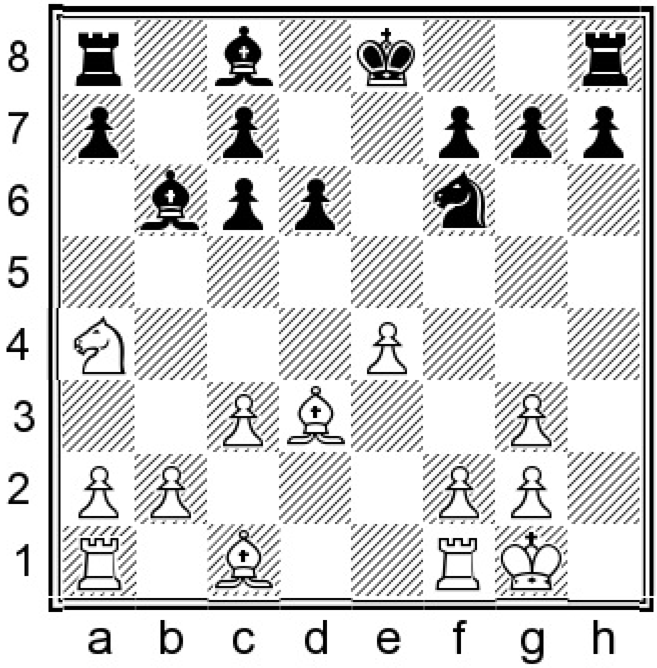
10...♗d4

The bishop provokes a slight weakness on the opponent's queenside before going to b6.

11.c3 ♗b6 12.0-0

Radjabov had played 12.f3 against Aronian in Wijk aan Zee 2009, but it was a quick draw. This move is no better.

12...♕xg3 13.hxg3



Question: Maybe castling short was not very ambitious, but the position is about equal, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, that’s right objectively, but Carlsen was already optimistic about his chances. He said after the game “I did not have any problems from the opening. When he castled short, I think Black is already slightly better despite White’s bishop pair.”

Exercise: Maybe he is not objectively better, but he liked his position. This is also important. Which move made him trust in his chances?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

13...♘g4!

This move was prepared by the exchange of queens. The knight heads for e5, from where it cannot be dislodged as after f4 the knight gets the g4-square and there is no h3.

14.♗f4 f6

Now the e5 square is available for the knight. Black has a pleasant position.

15.♖ad1 h5

There is no hurry in playing ...♘e5. Black prepares a future ...h4, or maybe even ...g5.

16.♗e2 ♗e6 17.♘xb6

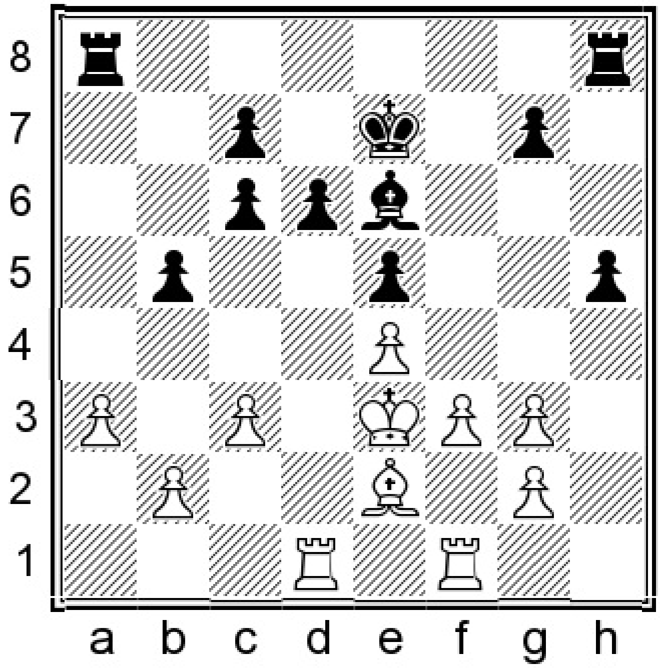
This exchange must be carried out to be able to expulse the black knight with f3.

17...axb6 18.a3 ♔e7 19.f3 ♘e5 20.♔f2 b5

White has no plans to fight for the advantage. He begins to play safely, and continues to do so during almost all the game, trusting in the impregnability of his position.

First, he exchanges the strong knight.

21.♗xe5 fxe5 22.♔e3



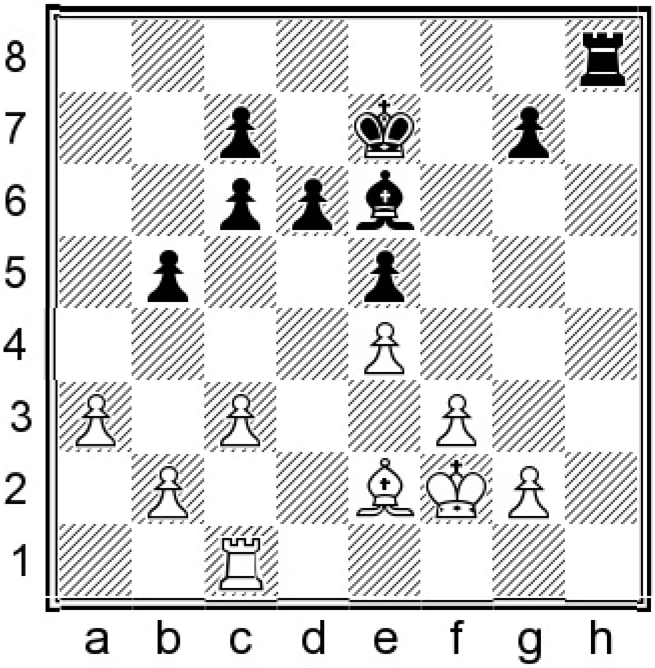
22...h4

Question: Black allows White to eliminate the doubled g-pawns. Why did Carlsen do that?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: For two reasons. One is to avoid the advance 23.f4, and the other is to make the position less easy to play. Opening the h-file adds a new element to the battle. Obviously, if the position remains closed it would be almost impossible to get chances to gain the advantage.

23.gxh4 ♖xh4 24.♖h1 ♖ah8 25.♖xh4 ♖xh4 26.♖c1 ♖h2 27.♔f2 ♖h8



Question: OK, the position is a little more complicated, but does Black have some advantage? The h-file doesn’t seem enough.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: You are right, there is no advantage, but we know that to win endings from an equal position is not something alien to Lasker in the past or to Carlsen in our days.

28.♔e3

White continues waiting, trusting in the solidness of his position. It is possible to play like this, but you must be alert to realise when the waiting tactics are not enough and must be changed.

White could play c4 on several occasions, trying to change the structure. He could do it now with 28.c4, with an equal ending, but there is also equality after the king move.

28...g5

Black stops f4 and makes a future ...g4 possible to open up the position, if it is helpful.

29.♗d3 ♔d7

The king now defends the c7 pawn. 30.c4 is of course still possible, but White would not be threatening to take on b5 and then on c7.

30.♖a1

If 30.c4 the game would probably continue 30...bxc4 31.♗xc4 ♗xc4 32.♖xc4 c5, and Black is slightly better, as White has several weaknesses, but with a correct defence it should be a draw.

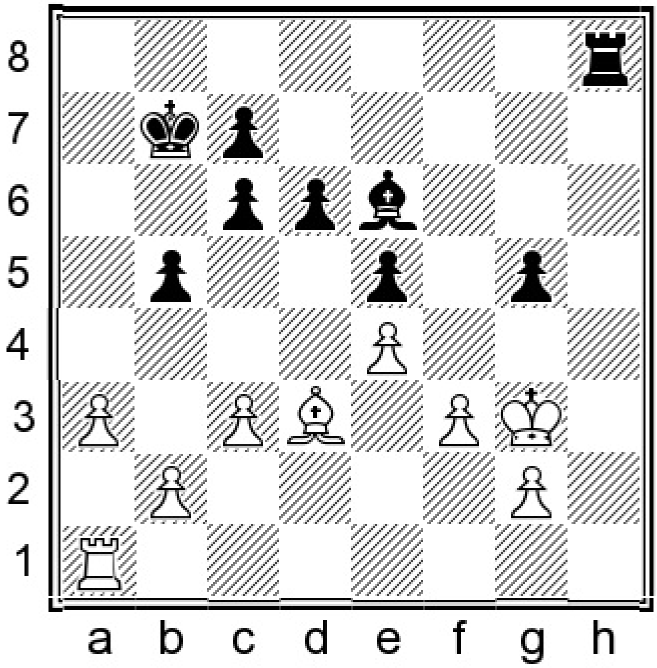
30...♗b3 31.♖c1 ♔c8 32.♔f2

Now, with the king on c8, it would be a safer moment to play 32.c4, but Radjabov prefers to continue waiting.

Carlsen provided an explanation to his opponent's reluctance to play more actively: "I felt good and played rather quickly (which is somewhat risky). One advantage is of course that he was not allowed to think much on my time."

So, with not much time to think it is understandable that White prefers to wait, as there is nothing wrong with that at this moment.

32...♔b7 33.♔g3 ♗e6 34.♖a1



Exercise: Nothing really important has happened in the last moves, but now Black made a small step forward. What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

34...♔b6!

This was the point of the king manoeuvre initiated with 29...♔d7. The long king march was necessary to defend the b-pawn and make ...c6–c5 possible.

35.♖c1 c5 36.♖a1

36.c4 was possible, but the position is not so simple. Black could try 36...b4, but maybe 36...bxc4 is a little better, accepting the exchange of bishops. After 37.♗xc4 ♗xc4 38.♖xc4 the structure is different, and Black can play ...c6 followed by ...d5 at the right moment.

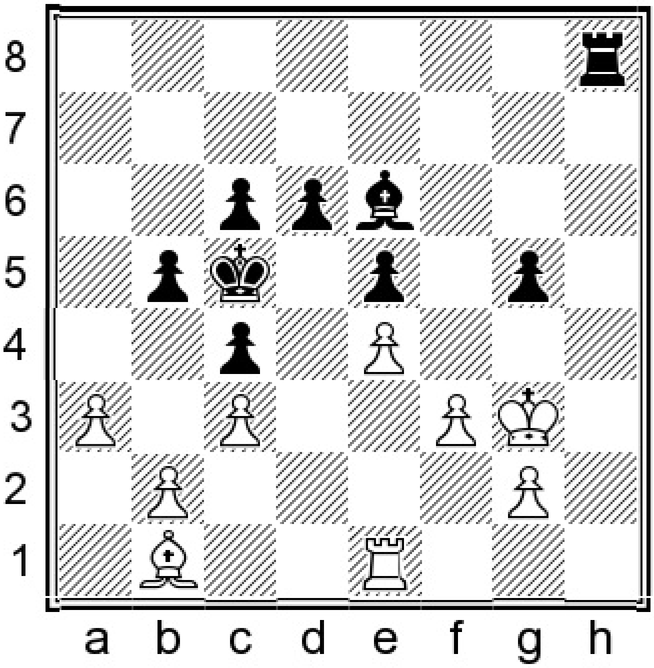
36...c4

Black continues grabbing space, but he will need a plan to make further progress. This is the beginning of the new plan.

37.♗c2 ♔c5 38.♖e1 c6

This was the idea. Black wants to play ...d5 and create a passed pawn on the d-file.

39.♗b1



Black has made improvements, that's clear, but the planned advance ...d5 is not possible yet.

Exercise: What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

39...♔b6!

The e5-pawn needs support to play ...d5, so Carlsen starts another march with his king, to f6, to make the advance possible.

40.♗c2 ♔c7 41.♔f2 ♔d7 42.a4

White finally abandons his waiting policy, and this is what Carlsen commented: “He initially decided to defend passively. I made slow but steady progress, and after time control, he went for a4 for some activity as the position was unpleasant for White.”

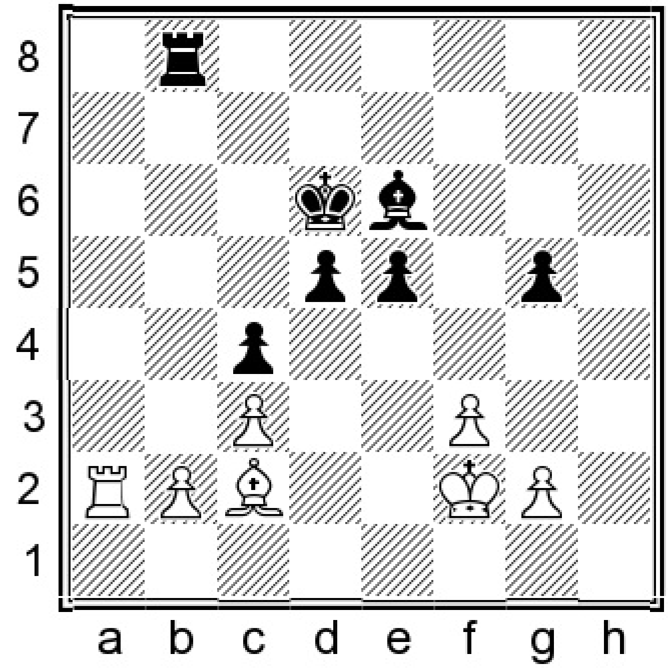
42...bxa4 43.♖a1

Now Black can play ...d5 sooner. If 43.♗xa4 White would remain passive after 43...♖b8: the white rook must remain on the e-file, so a possible plan for Black is to play ...♔c7-b6-c5 and then defend his e-pawn with his rook to finally play ...d5.

43...♖b8 44.♖a2 d5 45.exd5

If the immediate 45.♗xa4 Black can play the strong 45...d4, and as we will see it is better for White to get rid of his e-pawn to get more space for his bishop.

45...cxd5 46.♗xa4+ ♔d6 47.♗c2



47...d4

Question: Carlsen has made clear progress, is he much better?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Although Carlsen has finally achieved his aim, the position is still very difficult to win. He has got a passed pawn, but there is not much material left and White should be able to defend his weaknesses.

48.♗e4

The bishop uses this square which is available thanks to 45.exd5.

48...♖b6 49.♔e2

Now it is White's king who starts a long trip to defend the b-pawn.

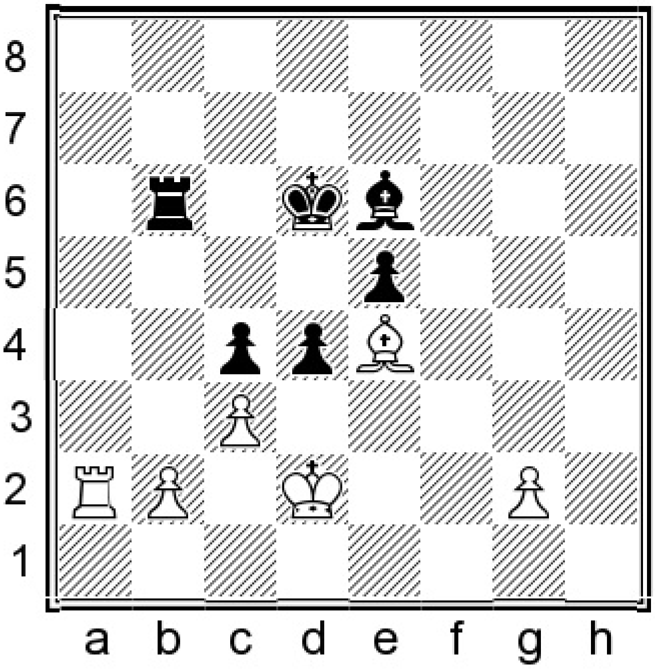
49...g4 50.fxg4?!

"I don't know exactly where he went wrong, maybe 50.fxg4 was a mistake," said Carlsen.

It is still a draw, but this exchange, avoiding 50...g3, gives Black more practical chances, as "This opens further roads for Black's attack," as Karsten Mueller noted.

The immediate 50.♔d2 was safer, as 50...g3 can be met by 51.♔c1 ♗h3 52.♖a8 ♗xg2 53.♖g8 (Mueller), while in other lines when White plays ♔c1 the a2-rook is free and can counterattack, maintaining equality. However, 50.fxg4 is not losing.

50...♗xg4+ 51.♔d2 ♗e6

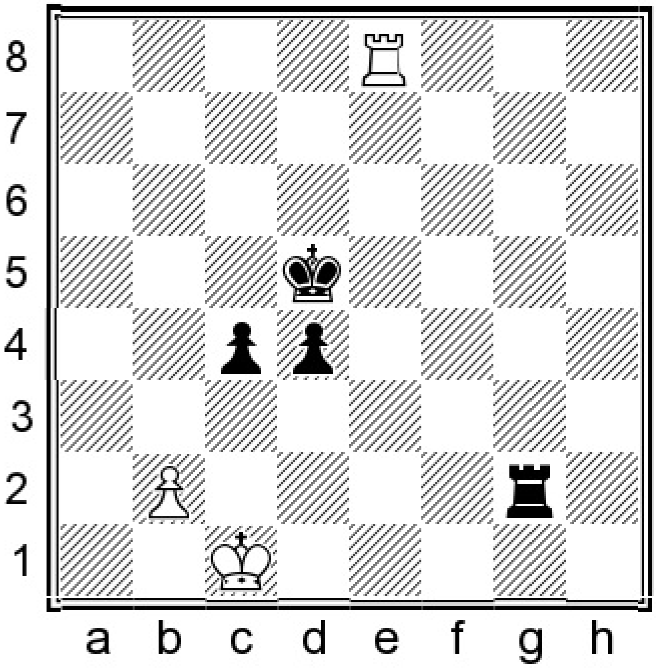


52.♔c2?

This is the final mistake, as Mueller pointed out.

After the game, Carlsen mentioned the best defence, 52.♔c1!, when the only way to try to progress is to play 52...♗d5, as he intended to play, but after 53.♗xd5 ♔xd5 White seems to survive, even after losing the g-pawn.

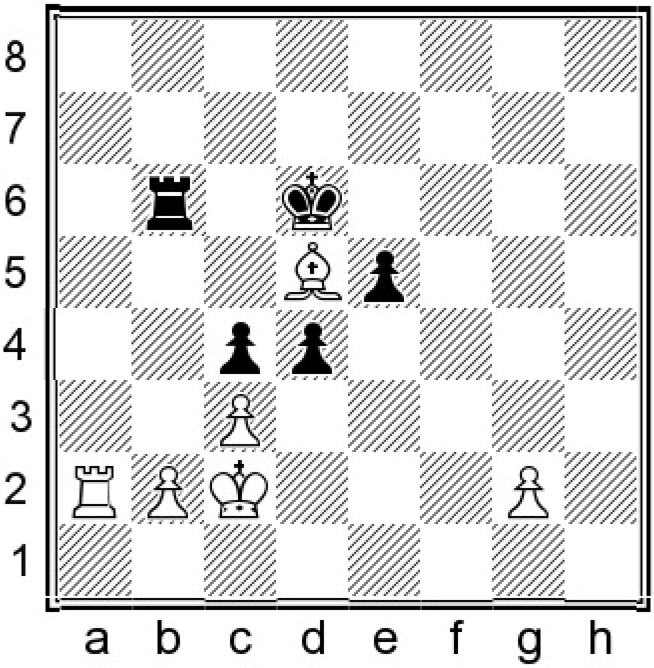
As Mueller indicated, after e.g. 54.cxd4 exd4 55.♖a8 ♖g6 56.♖e8! ♖xg2



White needs to make several only moves, beginning with 57.♖e7! d3 58.♖b7! ♔d4 59.♔d1! ♔e3 60.♖e7+! ♔f2. Only now, after four only moves and with the black king far away, does White have choices. He can either attack the c4 pawn or defend his b2 pawn. The black king, after playing 57...d3, has no place to hide from the checks by the rook. The game could continue 61.♖f7+ ♔g1 62.♖c7 or 62.♖b7 and Black cannot progress.

52...♗d5 53.♗xd5

Keeping the bishops on the board with 53.♗g6 does not help, as Mueller points out: after 53...d3+ 54.♔d2 the obvious move 54...♗xg2 is winning, as White cannot maintain the blockade forever. It is curious that the engines prefer 54...e4! instead of taking the g2 pawn; after 55.♔e3 ♔e5 56.♗e8 ♖b7, the rook will invade White's position through the h- or f-file, e.g. 57.♗h5 ♖h7 58.g4 ♖b7! 59.♗g6 ♖b6 60.♗h5 ♖f6 or 60.♗f5 ♖h6.



Exercise: What would you do? Take on d5 or play 53...d3+ first?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

53...d3+!

“Before the second time control, I managed to make the decisive breakthrough,” said Carlsen, but only this intermediate move wins.

The direct 53...♔xd5? destroys all the previous efforts, as White has time to play 54.cxd4 exd4. After 55.♖a5+ ♔e4 56.♖a8! “Black’s king has no hiding place, e.g. 56...d3+ 57.♔c3 ♖b3+ 58.♔xc4 d2 59.♖d8 ♖xb2 60.♔c3” (Mueller).

54.♔d2 ♔xd5 55.♔e3 ♖g6 56.♖a5+ ♔e6 57.♔e4

The pawn endgame is lost after 57.♖a6+ ♔f5 58.♖xg6 ♔xg6: Black will go to take the g2 pawn, and White has no defence. 59.b4 doesn’t work: 59...cxb3 60.♔xd3 e4+ and one black pawn queens.

57.♔f2 doesn’t resist either. Black wins in several ways, one is 57...♖f6+ and White must allow the entrance of the rook after 58.♔e3 ♖f1 or the advance of the e-pawn with 58.♔e1 e4, followed by ...e3-e2, winning easily in both cases.

There is another unsuccessful try, 57.b3, and play could continue 57...♖g3+ 58.♔e4 (or 58.♔f2 d2) 58...d2! 59.♖xe5+ ♔f6 60.♖f5+ (or 60.♖d5 ♖d3) 60...♔g6 61.♖f1 cxb3 62.♔d4 (or 62.c4 b2, followed by ...♖b3) 62...b2 63.♖d1 ♔g7, preparing ...♖g6-b6, while if 64.♔c4 then 64...♖e3-e1.

57...♖g4+ 58.♔f3 ♖f4+ 59.♔e3 ♖f1

Radjabov resigned as there is no defence against the two connected passed pawns, e.g. 60.g4 ♖e1+ 61.♔d2 ♖e2+ 62.♔d1 e4 63.♖c5 ♖xb2 64.♖xc4 ♔e5 (threatening ...e3) 65.♖d4 ♔f4, followed by 66...♔e3.

0–1

Karsten Mueller praised the "really amazing endgame technique" that Magnus Carlsen showed in this game. It reminded him of one of Capablanca's famous wins, against Ilya Kan in Moscow 1936: "Carlsen collected small advantages and always found a way to make progress towards his aim," he said.

The name Lasker also comes to our mind, and also Rubinstein. Although the pawn structure of this game is similar to Kan – Capablanca, it also has similarities with Spielmann – Rubinstein, Saint Petersburg 1909.

"The position from the opening was more or less equal and it was never on my mind to steer for a draw. You have to take your chances and I felt that the position held more dangers for him than me. Fortunately, I put pressure on him," said Carlsen.

He pressed throughout the game, until his opponent began to make mistakes. Carlsen said that his opponent "could not make the right decisions at the critical moments."

It was a hard-fought game. A satisfied Carlsen said "After such a long tournament break, it felt great to win again."

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) The game reached an ending quite early, and an equal ending at that, but Carlsen was not satisfied with a draw without trying to win. The same approach would have been taken by Lasker and many other great masters of the past.

2.) Black got a slightly better ending, but no more than that, so White simply decided to wait. It was enough to hold the balance, but in practice it was riskier (*28.c4 30.c4*).

3.) A solid position cannot be broken without pawn advances. Black made small improvements to his position by making long trips with his king, first to be able to play ...c5 (29...♔d7! 31...♔c8! 32...♔b7! 34...♔b6!) and then to defend his e-pawn to play ...d5 (39...♔b6! 40...♔c7! 41...♔d7!).

4.) "A game of chess, after all, is a fight..." (Lasker). The defending side has to display a precise defence when it has a passive position, especially when his opponent continues pressing and playing for a win. (50.fxg4? 52.♔c2? *50.♔d2!*).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

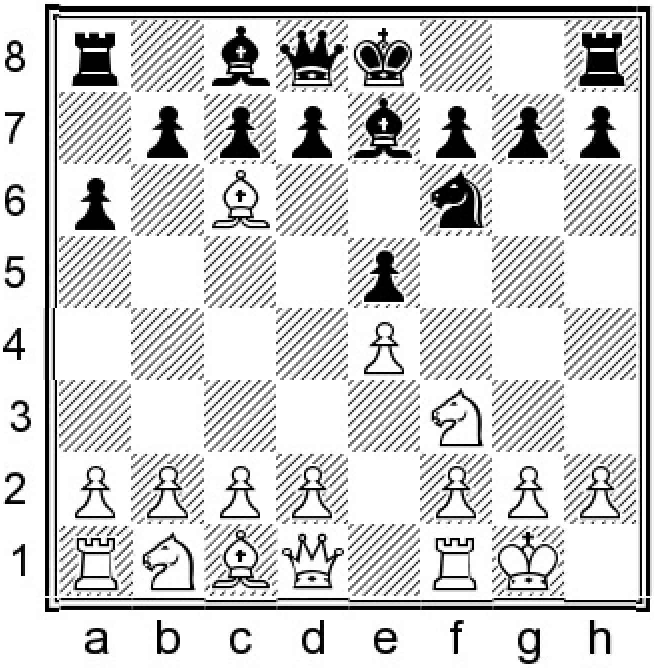
Game 8

Luke McShane – Magnus Carlsen

Ruy Lopez [C85]

Tal Memorial, Moscow (9), 18.06.2012

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♘f6 5.0-0 ♗e7 6.♗xc6



This exchange was a surprise for Carlsen, “and a slightly unpleasant one”.

Question: Yes? Why?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because this game was played in the last round, and Carlsen was almost forced to win to have a chance to finish in first place, while the resulting structures of this variation make it hard for Black to create winning chances.

Luckily for him, McShane also had the chance to gain first place, so he would probably try to win too, but he first deviated from more usual lines.

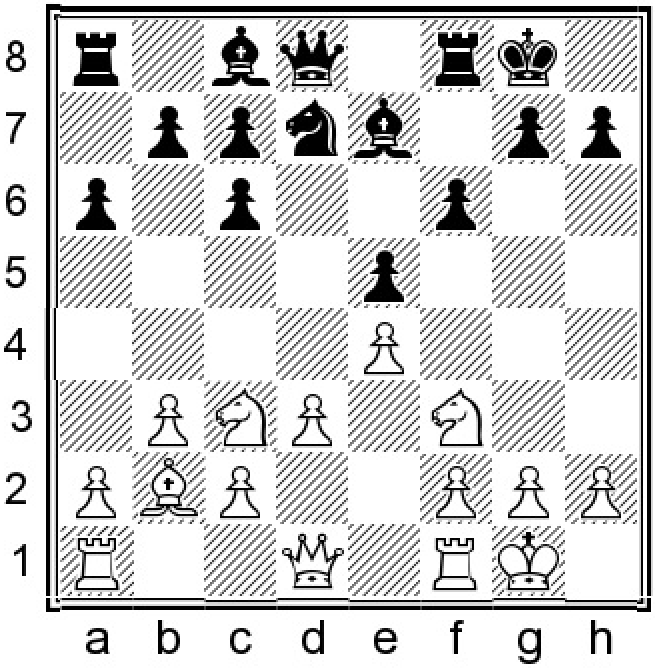
6...dxc6 7.d3

The position is more or less equal. Lubosh Kavalek noted the amazing similarity this game had with one Paul Keres played against Max Blau in Zurich 1959: “the legendary Estonian grandmaster Paul Keres provided a blueprint for how to play this variation with the black pieces...”

7...♘d7 8.b3

Carlsen said he was “already out of the book here, as such positions can more or less be played by hand.”

8...0-0 9.♗b2 f6 10.♘c3



Carlsen had expected 10.♘bd2

Question: So,is 10.♘c3 a bad move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: No, it’s fine, because it has a good plan in mind, as Carlsen pointed out: “c3–e2 is a sensible route as well, especially if it supports f4 from there.”

Now it’s time for Black to choose a plan, and play its initial move.

Exercise: How did he continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

10...♖e8

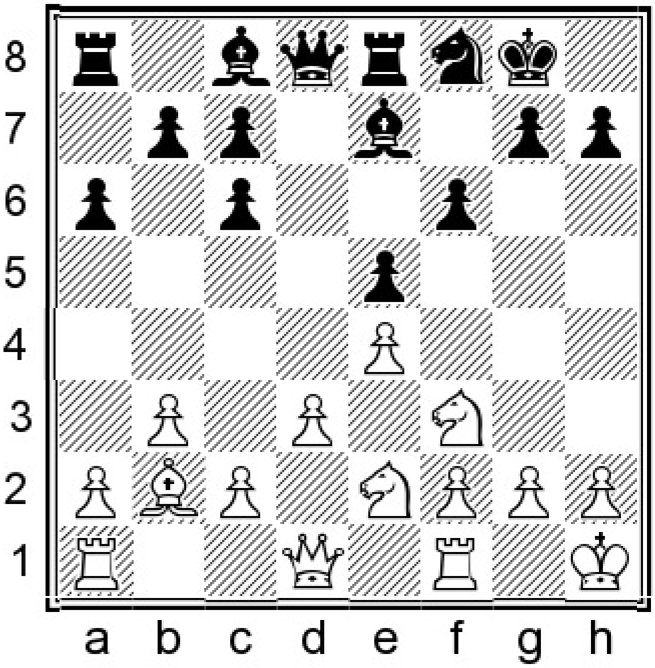
Like in a rather similar position of the Rossolimo, Black plans to get his knight to d4, and this move vacates f8 for the knight.

Carlsen didn’t like the apparently more active 10...♘c5, with the same idea, due to 11.d4 exd4 12.♘xd4, and “the knight might look a bit funny on c5.”

11.♔h1

Carlsen didn’t like this move, but he added “it obviously doesn’t spoil the position.”

11...♘f8 12.♘e2



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12...c5!

He continued with his plan to bring his knight to d4; firstly, he stops White's d-pawn from advancing. Here we can see the different approach that computers and humans still adopt in certain positions (especially in closed positions): the engines prefer 12...♘g6.

13.♘h4 ♘e6 14.♘f5

White is playing for a win too, rejecting 14.f4. If played, then Black should not reply 14...exf4 15.♘f5 ♗d6 16.♘xd6 ♕xd6 17.♕d2, followed by 18.♘xf4, which "is very comfortable for White," as Carlsen explained. Instead, Black would play the more precise 14...♘xf4, although in the position after 15.♘xf4 exf4 16.♖xf4 ♗d6 (not 16...g5? 17.♘f5) 17.♖f2 ♗e5 18.♗xe5 ♖xe5 it is very difficult to play for a win.

Carlsen welcomed White's ambitious choice because, as Carlsen said, "now Black gets the chance to keep some of the tension, which improved my mood a lot."

14...♗f8 15.♘e3

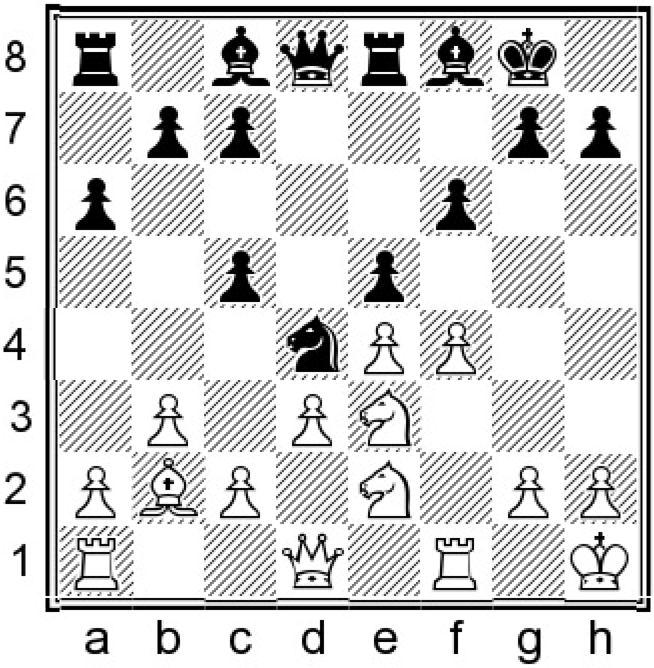
The knight abandons f5, because after 15.f4 ♘xf4! 16.♘xf4, instead of 16...exf4 17.♖xf4 and White is slightly better, Black has the intermediate 16...♗xf5! 17.exf5 exf4 18.♖xf4 ♗d6, and Black has no problems.

15...♘d4

The knight arrives at his ideal place. White can expulse it, but only by creating a weakness on d3.

16.f4

Kavalek pointed out that McShane doesn't limit himself to waiting like Blau did, but seeks some play on the kingside. This advance is also White's standard reaction in the lines of the Rossolimo we mentioned on move 10.



Exercise: How did Carlsen respond?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16...♗e6!

Now there is no need to take on f4, activating the e2-knight.

17.fxe5

Question: Black didn't take on f4, but... that allowed 17.f5 followed by 18.g4 like in a King's Indian. It looks frightening to me.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Naturally, Carlsen was aware of the possibility of 17.f5 ♗f7 18.g4. If we compare the position with a King's Indian with reversed colours we see some differences, like the b2-bishop, which now is far from the kingside, and also the e3-knight doesn't seem to be in the best place.

Carlsen said: "Black should be doing well then, as playing g5 is still many moves away for White, and counterplay with ...b5–c4 will always be in the air."

17...fxe5 18.♘g1 g6

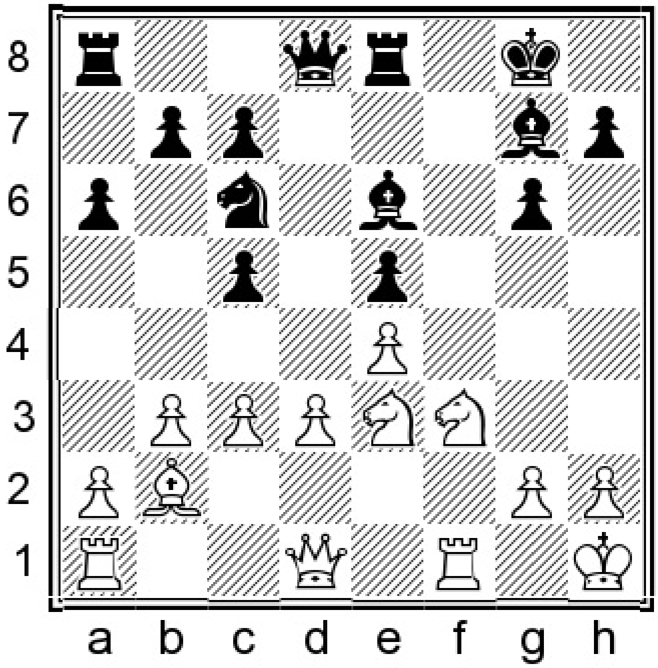
The f8-bishop has found his best square. The main purpose is to defend the e5-pawn in the easiest way.

19.c3

Finally pushing the annoying knight back, but also creating weaknesses, as we mentioned.

If 19.♘f3 then 19...♗g7 is possible, but Carlsen considered it was better not just to defend, but to counterattack with 19...♗h6 20.♘c4 ♗g4 and Black is very active, even slightly better.

19...♘c6 20.♘f3 ♗g7



"It's too early for Black to claim an advantage here, but I was feeling good about the situation, especially as my opponent was burning a lot of time," said Carlsen.

Question: The engines aren't so optimistic at this moment; they don't see any advantage for Black. Has the world champion concrete reasons to be so confident?

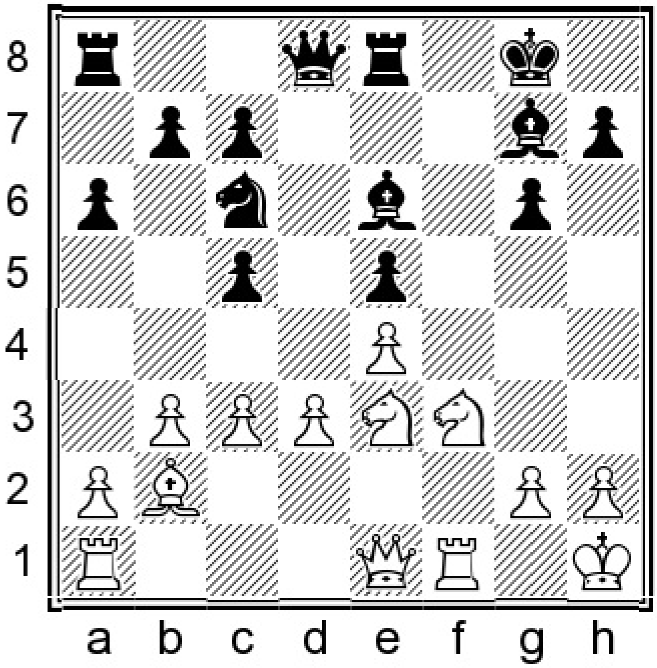
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: We see he mentioned the practical factor: time trouble is coming for White, and we can recall the phrase of Jorge Valdano, the ex-football player, world champion with Argentina in Mexico 1986, “football is a state of mind”, so we can probably say “chess is a state of mind,” too.

Incidentally, there is a good documentary, also from 1986, called “Chess – A State of Mind”, but without much connection with what we are talking about. You can find it on YouTube.

21.♕e1?!

White also feels optimistic; he plans to defend d3 with ♖d1, and move the queen to g3, trying to get active play on the kingside. The engines prefer the unexciting 21.♕c2.



“In view of my next move, this is a clear inaccuracy,” said Carlsen.

Exercise: What is that move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21...a5!

“Taking advantage of the fact that b3 is no longer protected by the queen [so he cannot reply 22.a4] and forcing a weakening on the queenside.” (Carlsen).

“I forgot about ...a5,” said McShane; he was hoping for 21...♕xd3? 22.♖d1 ♕b5 (22...♕xe4 23.♘g5 is even worse and the queen is trapped) 23.♘d5, with White enjoying an advantage.

Like in the Keres game, the rook pawn will shatter White’s queenside. “It is incredible how similar Carlsen’s game turns out to be more than half a century later.” (Kavalek).

So, dear reader, you should definitely give it a look.

22.♖d1 a4 23.bxa4

Not nice, but 23.c4 abandons d4 and b4 for the black knight. Black could continue 23...axb3 24.axb3 ♖a2, with a better position.

23...♖xa4

Carlsen briefly considered 23...♗xa2?, but after 24.c4, the bishop is misplaced; it would be followed by 25.♘d5, planning ♕g3, ♖df2, etc.. White gets activity, but in the game he doesn’t.

24.a3

White is worse. He has an ugly position, with a worse pawn structure, but there is nothing decisive yet.

24...♖f8 25.♗c1 ♖a8

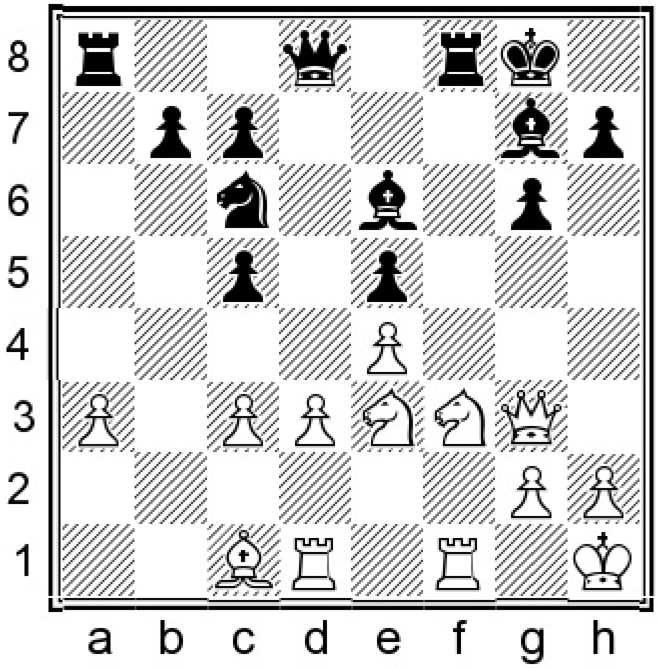
Question: Is White still fine here? Why?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen indicated the reason: “It’s hard to get to the white weaknesses, and my pieces don’t have very many squares.”

But with White’s next move the situation changes considerably.

26.♕g3?



“Another inaccuracy, which is based on an overestimation of his attacking chances after the subsequent pawn sac,” said Carlsen.

Exercise: How did Carlsen exploit White’s error?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26...♗b3!

White has to choose between two unpleasant moves.

27.♖de1

“Too optimistic,” said Kavalek. Carlsen said that objectively this is just a blunder. He then added, “But I can understand why Luke was not too keen on 27.♖d2 ♗h6 28.♕e1 ♗e6 (countering 29.c4) 29.♖d1 ♗f4, when Black is slowly but surely improving his position.”

27...♕xd3 28.♘g4 ♗e6

28...♕xc3 was also possible, but the chosen retreat “felt very sensible” to Carlsen.

29.♘h6+ ♔h8 30.♕h4

White has several attacking pieces on the kingside, but he needs some time to be able to create threats, e.g. 31.♘g5 is not possible yet due to the undefended situation of the f1-rook.

30...♗f6

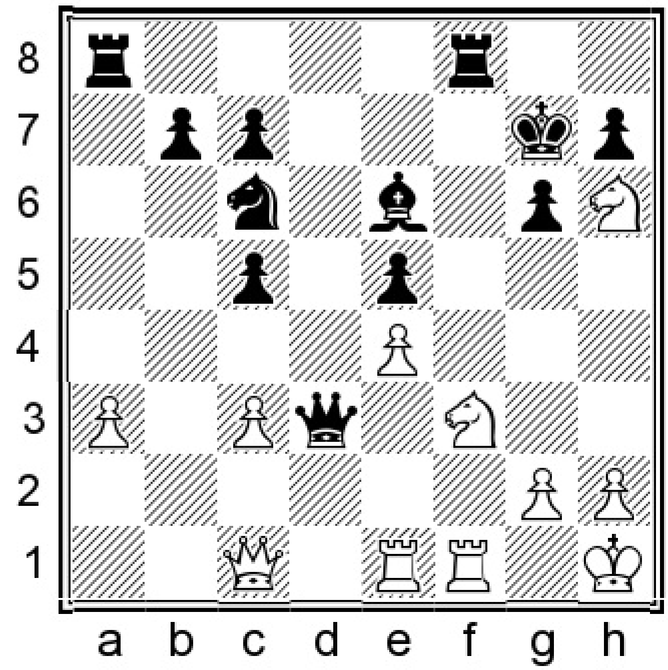
Now White must retreat his queen or exchange bishops.

31.♗g5 ♗xg5 32.♕xg5 ♔g7

The expected scenario of the next phase would be Black gradually improving his position while White has no counterplay.

33.♕c1

A sad retreat but White has several weak pawns, problems with the knight on h6 and his back rank. After 33.♘g4 ♗xg4 34.♕xg4 ♖ad8! “Black is ready to pick up a few loose pawns.” (Kavalek).



Black has a winning position, but it is always necessary to be alert.

Exercise: What would you play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

33...♖f4?

As Carlsen admitted, this was “A really careless mistake.” After the safe 33...♕d7, or 33...♕d6, Black “was easily winning as White is a pawn down with a bad position.”

34.♖d1?

White is not alert either, and misses his opportunity: 34.♘g5! would give White good practical chances.

Carlsen mentioned two lines: 34...♗c4 35.♖xf4 exf4 36.♘g4 and Black is better, but this continuation “keeps the fight going.” Here the engines are not afraid of playing 36...h5, but at the board the situation wouldn’t be so clear after 37.♕xf4 hxg4 38.♕xc7+ ♔h6 39.♕f4.

The alternative was 34...♕d6 35.♖xf4 exf4 36.♖d1 ♕e5 37.♘xe6+ ♕xe6 38.♕xf4, “and White has his best position in a long time,” said Carlsen. Let’s see a little more: 38...♖f8 39.♕e3 ♘e5 40.h3 b6, and Black still has the edge.

Question: What is the explanation for Carlsen’s mistake?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: From a distance we could attribute it to excess confidence. More technically, this is what Carlsen said: “For some reason, I only considered this after 34.♖d1 ♕c4, when it can be easily met by ...♖af8, as the queen protects the bishop on e6.”

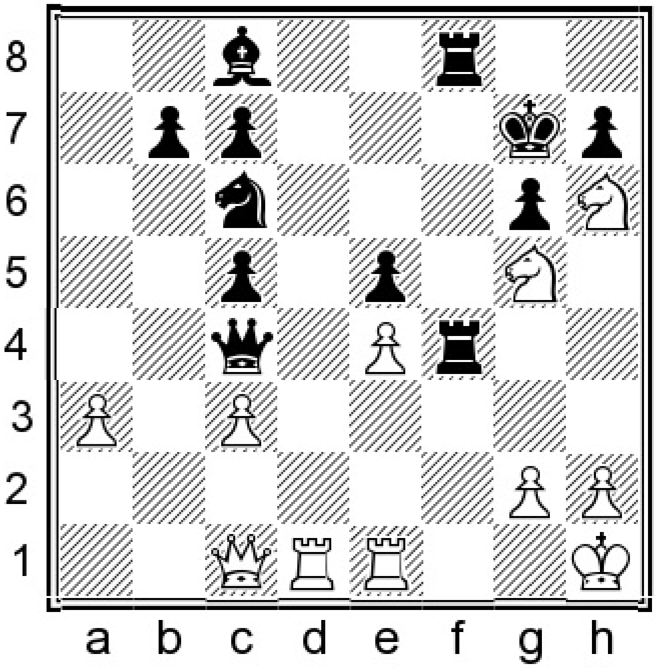
34...♕c4!

The bishop is safely defended, and Black is clearly winning again.

35.♖fe1

35.♘g5 ♖af8 “is plain sailing, as mentioned earlier.” (Carlsen).

35...♖af8 36.♘g5 ♗c8



"Now the knight on h6 is doomed. Luke was also running out of time, which didn't make it any easier." (Carlsen).

37.g3 ♖f2

Threatening 38...♕a2 and there is no defence; White's next move only accelerates the end.

38.♘f5+ gxf5 39.♘h3 ♖e2 40.♕g5+ ♔h8

0–1

This game was played in the last round. Carlsen was in a "must-win" situation. The same could be said of his opponent, who had beaten two 2800+ players (Kramnik and Aronian) in the previous rounds.

So, even if the position was rather dry, both players were playing for a win, discarding lines leading to drawish positions.

White went too far in trying to activate his forces and was punished with precise play. Black emulated a manoeuvre played first by Paul Keres, as mentioned by Kavalek, and then outplayed his opponent with better calculation.

Chess is almost never easy. Carlsen made a mistake and he could have lost most of his advantage, but his opponent, in time trouble, didn't notice his unexpected opportunity and "Chess was easy again." (Najdorf).

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Knowing the usual plans of the structure played, and knowing the classics is always useful. (11...♘f8! 12...c5! 13...♘e6! 21...a5!).

2.) We all love to attack, but sometimes it is just not possible and we must play solidly. (*21.♕c2*!

21.♕e1? 26.♕g3?).

3.) “What is my opponent planning?” or “what defence does he have?” are questions which, as we know, we should continually ask ourselves, since they can guide us towards choosing the best move, and/or avoiding mistakes. (33...♖f4? *33...♕d7!*).

4.) As Lasker showed us, there are always chances of defence, because even great players commit mistakes. (*34.♘g5!*).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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Game 11

Fabiano Caruana – Magnus Carlsen

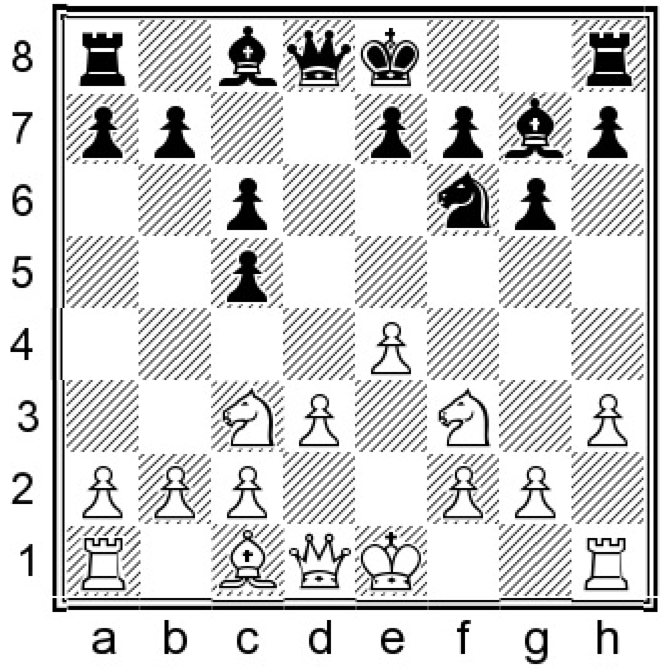
Sicilian Defence [B31]

Tata Steel Wijk aan Zee (6), 16.01.2015

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 g6

Carlsen has played almost all the logical moves against the Rossolimo; here he chooses what was always considered as the main line.

4.♗xc6 dxc6 5.d3 ♗g7 6.h3 ♘f6 7.♘c3



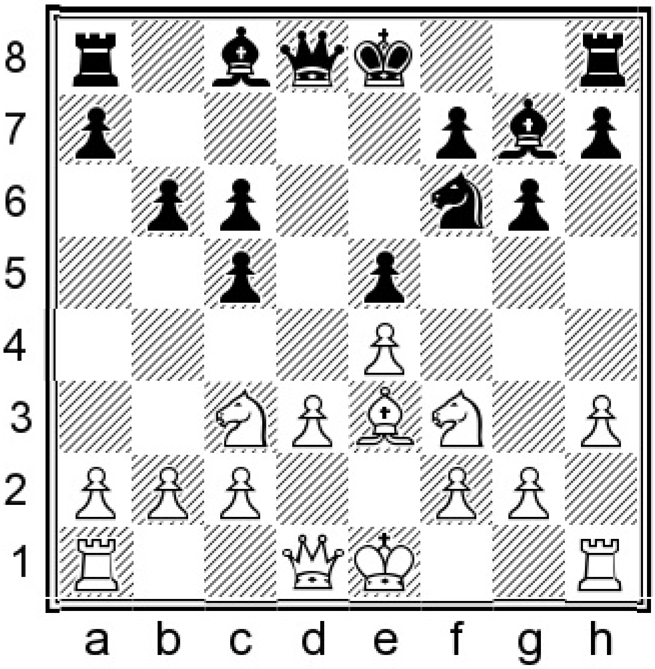
7...b6

This move may be needed after White plays ♗e3, but it is not a usual move and Carlsen hasn't played it since. 7...0-0 and 7...♘d7 are more usual, and Carlsen played both in later games. He chose the latter in the first game of his world championship match against Caruana in 2018, where he obtained a winning position but eventually drew.

As we know, one of the ideas of 7...♘d7 is to continue with ...e5, followed, if allowed, by ...♘d7–f8–e6-d4.

8.♗e3 e5?!

A logical move, as are 8...0-0 and 8...♘d7 with the ideas mentioned before, but what Carlsen chose was an improvisation over the board and has a tactical flaw.



9.0-0?!

Caruana thought for a few minutes and “believed” the world champion; now the game reaches a standard position.

Question: But both moves are natural, why are they dubious?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: For tactical reasons created after 7....b6.

White could punish Black by playing 9.♘xe5!, something not usually feared by Black because he has the counterpunch 9...♘xe4, but here 10.♕f3 follows and 10...♘d6 loses the c6-pawn, due precisely to the move 7....b6.

If Black plays 10...♗xe5, then after 11.♕xe4 f6 12.♗f4 (probably better than 12.f4 ♗f5 13.♕xc6+ ♗d7 14.♕e4 ♗f5) 12...0-0 13.♗xe5 White wins the c6-pawn and Black has insufficient compensation.

Nielsen believed that Caruana was considering 10...f5 11.♗f4 ♕e7 12.dxe4 ♗xe5 13.0-0-0, his conclusion being that White is somewhat better after e.g. 13...0-0 14.♗xe5 ♕xe5 15.exf5 ♗xf5 16.♕xc6 ♕f4+ 17.♖d2! “the rook protects f2 and there is no way to exploit the pin on the d-file.” (Nielsen).

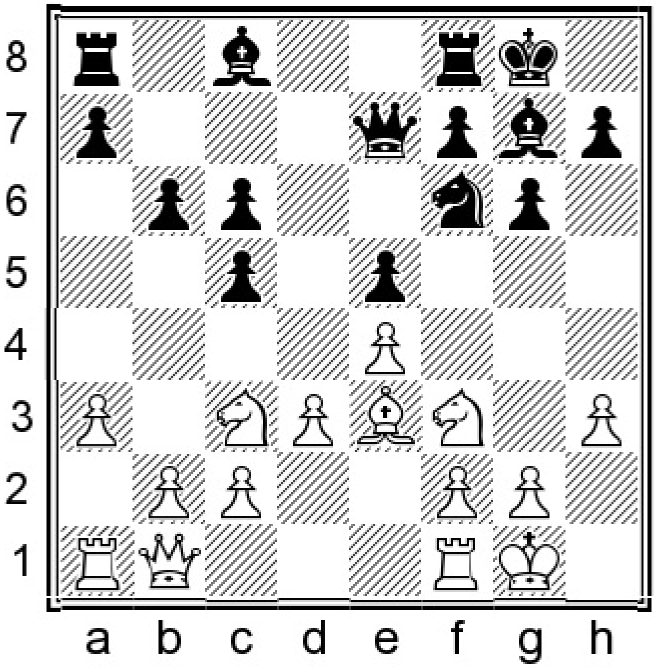
For the engines it is obvious, but even for a top-player, it is not easy to see it clearly at the board on move 8, because there are many choices for both sides.

Besides, Caruana probably thought that on move 8 he was still in Carlsen's preparation. Who would think otherwise?

9...0-0 10.a3

Caruana plays for the thematic rupture b4, trying to open the a-file and press the black queenside.

10...♕e7 11.♕b1



Caruana continues to prepare b4. He chose the queen to support the advance, leaving the rook on a1 to take advantage of the possible opening of the a-file.

This is ambitious, and he was obviously conscious of the fact that the queen momentarily moves away from the centre and kingside.

Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

11...♘h5

The advance b4 can be stopped by 11...a5?! but then 12.♘a4 follows and Black must play 12...♘d7, moving his knight far from the kingside. In that case, White's initiative on the queenside is so quick that Carlsen is obliged to forget about his plan to reach d4 with his f6-knight involving counterplay with ...f5. We could imagine that this idea was already contemplated when Carlsen decided to postpone the move ...♘d7.

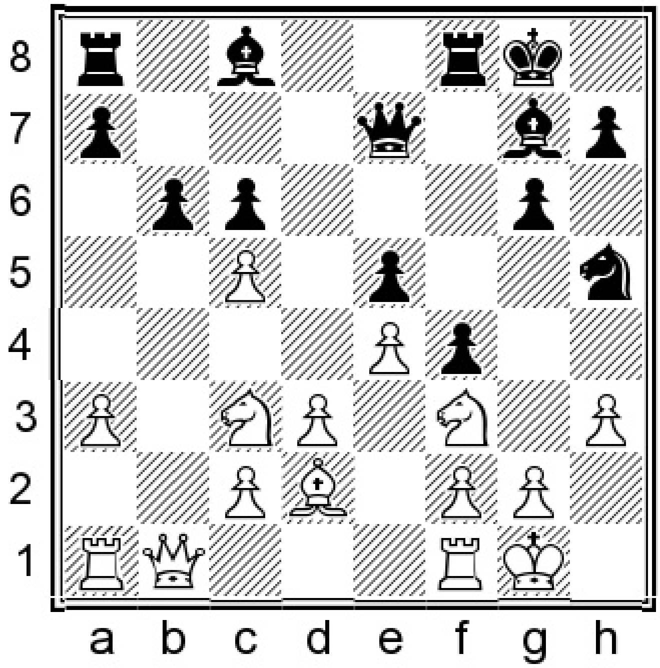
Now, with the white queen rather far away, the plan with ...f5 looks more attractive, and there is also the jump ...♘f4.

12.b4 f5

Black chooses the bayonet attack, leaving the f4 square for his f-pawn.

The engines prefer 12...♘f4, then after 13.bxc5 bxc5, the knight could defend the c5-pawn playing ...♘e6; Black could also consider continuing with ...f5, and/or ...g5.

13.bxc5 f4 14.♗d2



Exercise: How did Carlsen recapture on c5?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14...bxc5!

He accepted permanent damage to his pawn structure but maintained queens on the board, which is essential for his plan that started with 11...♘h5.

14...♕xc5? would allow 15.♕b3+ ♔h8 16.♕b4 and Black's initiative loses all its force.

As Nielsen commented, Black's risky strategy is similar to a King's Indian. Black has abandoned the queenside (the pawns in this case) and has placed all his hopes on the kingside.

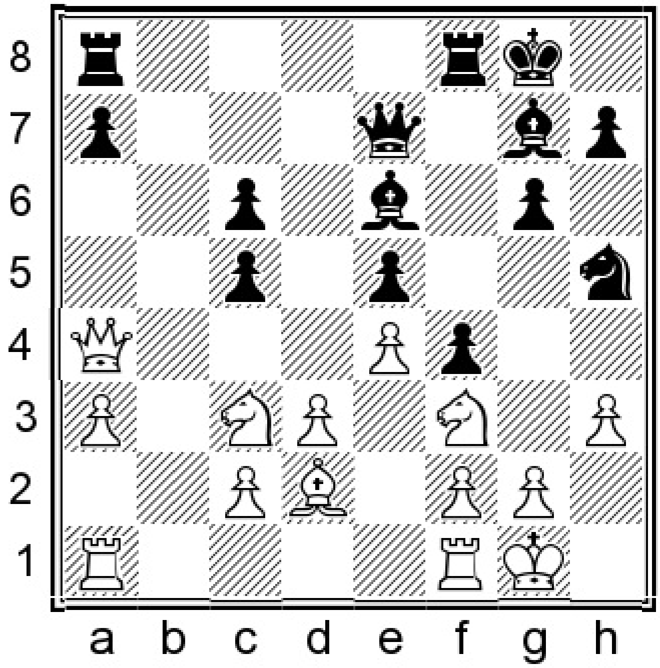
15.♕b3+

The queen moves to the a-file with tempo to accelerate the offensive.

After 15.♘a4 g5! 16.♘xc5 Black would continue playing in “King’s Indian style”. Instead of 16...♕xc5? which allows 17.♗b4 followed by 18.♗xf8 and ♘xg5, or 17.♕a2+ and ♘xg5, with a clear advantage, he would play 16...g4!. The sacrificed pawn has no relevance yet and Black has got what he wanted, i.e. open files on the kingside. We will encounter this scenario more times during the course of the game.

Five year later, the engines still approve of Black’s choice.

15...♗e6 16.♕a4



Exercise: The queenside is under attack. Should Black defend the pawn?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16...♖ac8!

This pawn must be fiercely defended. It is much more important than the c5-pawn, because it controls d5 and hence prevents the strong move ♘d5.

It is defended by the rook and not by the queen, because the advance ...g5 needs her support, and besides, the rook might not be as passive as it looks, because it can be transferred to the kingside after a timely ...♖c7.

17.♕a5

Planning 18.♘a4. A strong alternative was 17.♕a6 with the idea to bring a rook to b7, after e.g. 17...g5 18.♖fb1 Black must choose between 18...♖f7 and the immediate 18...g4 19.♖b7 ♕f6 20.hxg4 ♗xg4, and although White has reached the seventh rank, which is important, Black has also opened up the kingside, so we are again in a type of King's Indian where the position is very complex. Nielsen believed that Black had more practical chances.

17...g5 18.♘a4 g4

Not of course 18...c4? 19.♗b4.

19.hxg4 ♗xg4 20.♕xc5 ♕f6

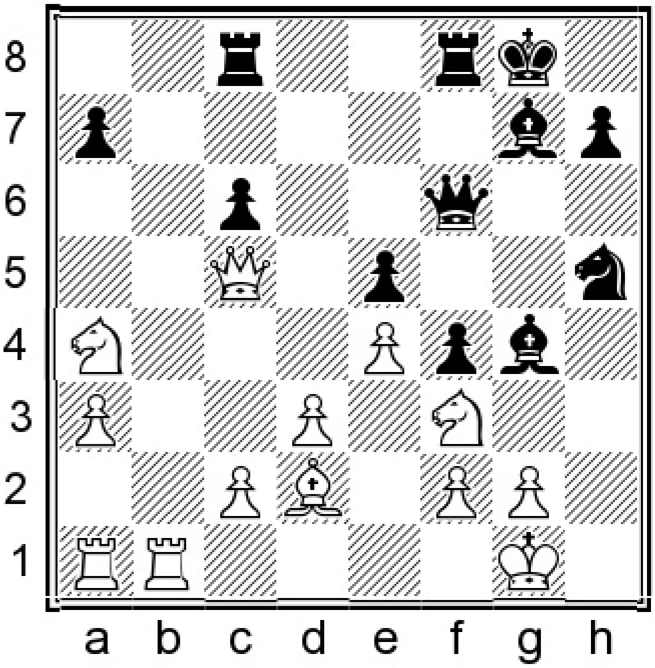
Both players have fulfilled their immediate plans. Caruana is a pawn up thanks to his superiority on the queenside, while in the meantime Carlsen has accelerated his kingside offensive, opening lines.

This complex position is "critical for the outcome of the game" (Nielsen). White has to decide to continue with his offensive or take defensive measures first. It is not a question of general considerations (or not only) but deep calculation, something very difficult at the board in this position.

21.♘h2?!

Caruana tries to stop the attack by expelling the bishop, but the outcome will be unsatisfactory.

The main alternative is 21.♖fb1, both to continue attacking through ♖b7, and also giving space for his king if he needs to run away from the kingside with ♔f1-e1 or e2.



Black has several ways to continue. Some are very tempting but also a mistake, such as a) the direct 21...♗xf3 22.gxf3 ♕g6+? 23.♔f1 ♘g3+, because White has the advantageous retreat 24.♔e1!, and the attack is restrained. In this line 22...♕h4 is preferable, and the king cannot run away yet. Black plans

23...♖f6.

Anyway, a more promising move order seems to be b) 21...♕g6!, then if 22.♔f1, trying to escape the danger zone, 22...♘g3+ follows. Accepting the offer is almost suicidal, because the f-file is opened, and after 23.fxg3? fxg3 there is obvious compensation, e.g., 24.♔e2 ♕h5! (maybe even better than 24...♗xf3+ 25.gxf3 ♕h5 26.♖f1 ♕h2+ and ...g2) and there is no good defence against the attack on f3 and the invasion with 25...♕h2.

So 23.♔e1 instead of 23.fxg3, looks preferable, and there is a forced draw by repetition suggested by the engines: 23...♘xe4 24.♕c4+ ♗e6 25.♕xe4 ♗f5 26.♕c4+ ♗e6 27.♕e4, because White cannot allow ...♕xg2 and Black cannot allow ♔e2.

23...♖f7 and 23...♕h5 are more complicated and more ambitious replies. In the case of 23...♖f7, Black would be threatening 24...♘xe4, and as White does not have 25.♕c4+ the position is very complex. After 24.♗b4, giving up the d2 square for the king, Black has the surprising 24...a5!. Then if 25.♕xa5 the white queen is too far away and Black has 25...♘xe4! 26.dxe4 ♕xe4+ 27.♔d2 ♖d7+ 28.♔c1 ♗f5, winning.

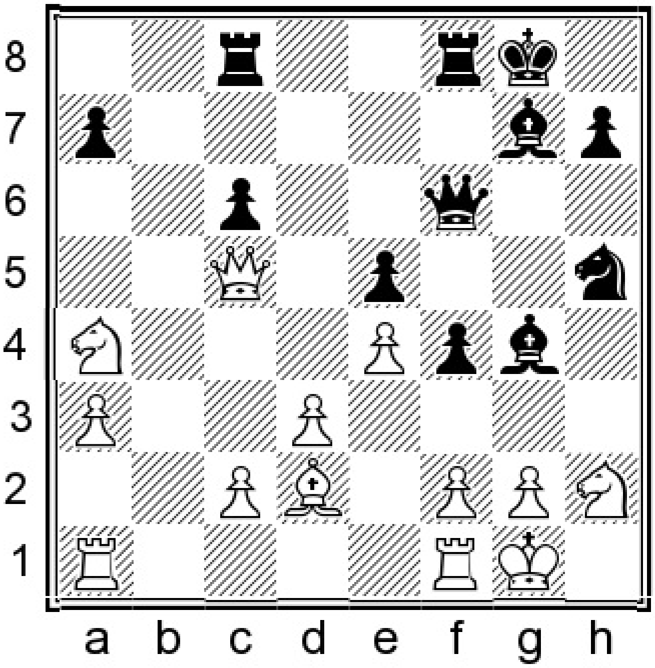
25.♗xa5 is better, but then the a4-knight is hanging, so Black can play 25...♘xe4. After 26.dxe4 ♕xe4+ 27.♔d2 the knight cannot be taken yet due to 28.♖b4, so Black must play 27...♗f8, and again, the position is very unclear.

If 23...♕h5, the engines suggest the continuation 24.♗b4 ♕h1+ 25.♔d2 ♕xg2, and, as the Russians say, “all three results are possible”.

The most flexible move is c) 21...♖f7!. Nielsen thought this would be Carlsen’s choice, “with serious compensation for the sacrificed pawn.”

This move 21...♖f7 would be the answer to 21.♖fe1, too.

Let’s return to the game!



Exercise: How did Carlsen respond?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21...f3!?

A difficult decision. Carlsen chooses the most incisive continuation, which is the most beautiful too. It is a good move, maybe not objectively the best, but with a strong practical impact.

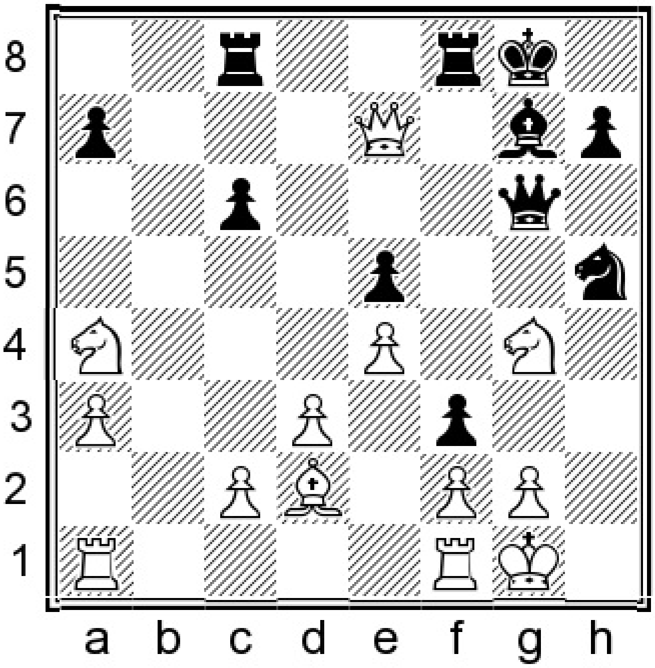
One good alternative was to defend the bishop with 21...♕g6! (planning 22...♗h3 or 22...f3), then after 22.f3 ♗h3 23.♖f2 Black has, among other ideas, a typical manoeuvre famous after the game Taimanov – Najdorf, Zurich 1953, 23...♖f7!, with the idea of continuing ...♗f8 and ...♖g7. The engines regard Black's attack as strong.

21...♕h4! was also attractive, to bring the f8-rook to f6 and h6. We encounter King's Indian motifs all the time.

In both cases, the simplification 22.♘xg4 ♕xg4 23.f3 ♕h4 is not a solution, as Black can play ...♘g3 or the even stronger 24...♔h8 followed by ...♖g8.

22.♘xg4 ♕g6 23.♕e7!

The only move. 23.♘e3? loses to 23...♘f4 24.♖fb1 (24.g3 ♘e2+ 25.♔h1 ♕h5#) and now the quickest way to win is 24...fxg2 25.f3 ♕g3!.



Exercise: How did Black continue his idea?

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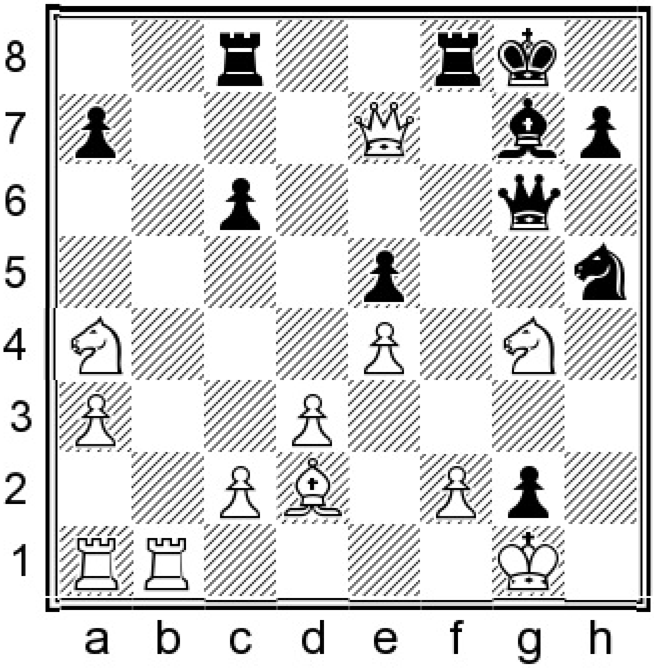
Answer:

23...fxg2!

Not the weak 23...♕xg4? due to 24.♕g5! and White is even better after exchanging queens.

24.♖fb1?



Question: The rook is heading to b7, it looks nice to me. Why is this a bad move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Due to tactical reasons, again, which are the most important factor.

White's move looks logical, but it's not the best choice. It was better to play 24.♖fe1!. The reason is tactical: after the continuation, 24...♕xg4 25.♕g5 ♕xg5 26.♗xg5 ♘f4, White has the defence 27.♖e3! and the worst is over.

Black can continue playing for the attack with 25...♕h3 26.♕xg2 ♕e6 with the idea 27...♖f6-g6, as Nielsen pointed out, or with 25...♕f3 26.♕xg2 ♕f7, with the idea 27...♔h8 followed by ...♖g8.

24...♕xg4 25.♕g5 ♕e2!

This was allowed by 24.♖fb1?, and it is stronger than the possibilities available in the line after

24.♖fe1.

With the rook on b1, 25...♕f3 is still possible, but no better, while 25...♕h3 is now worse due to 26.♕xg2 ♕e6? (26...♘f4! must be played) 27.♖b7 ♖f6 28.♘c5 ♕d6 29.♔h1! planning ♖g1, and after 29...♕xc5 30.♖g1 ♕f8 (or 30...♖g6 31.♕h3, with a double attack) 31.♕g4 White recovers the piece with a positional and material advantage.

26.♕e3

Trying to repeat moves or exchange queens, because after 26.♗e3? ♘f4 Black's attack is unstoppable. White is lost after 27.♗xf4 ♖xf4 28.♕g3 ♕h5, while if he plays 27.♕h4 then 27...♖f6 28.♖b7 ♖cf8! follows, with the idea of 29...♖g6 and 30...♕f3, but not the immediate 28...♖h6? because White answers 29.♖xg7+! ♔xg7 30.♕g5+ ♖g6 31.♕xe5+ ♔g8 32.♗xf4, winning.

26...♕g4 27.♕g5 ♕xg5!

After the exchange of queens Black gets the initiative with no risks involved and the pressure is on White again.

28.♗xg5 ♘f4 29.♗xf4?!

The most direct way to deal with the threat 29...♘h3+. Caruana opts for an exchange sacrifice which at first sight looks sensible, but Carlsen will refute it brilliantly.

If 29.♗h4 then 29...c5! follows with the idea of playing 30...♖c6, and the rook joins the attack, winning.

The best practical chance was 29.♔h2, but after thinking for a while Carlsen would hardly "regret" his decision to play for a win and repeat moves by the sequence 29...♗f6 30.♗h6 ♗g7, although during the game Carlsen thought it was almost forced.

Five years ago, Nielsen pointed out the possibility 29...h6 30.♗h4 h5, planning ...♗f6 or ...♘g6.

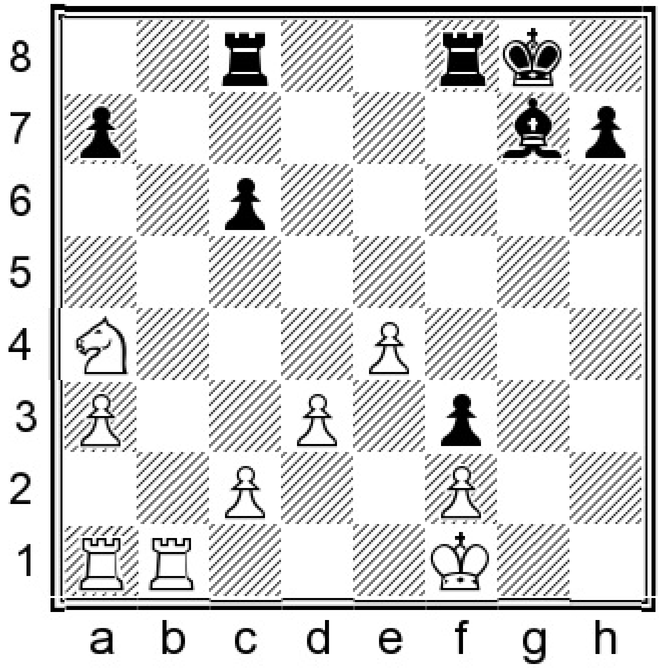
Now, after 31.♗g5 Black can avoid the repetition playing 31...♗f6 32.♗h6 ♖f7, with better chances (the engines even like the exchange sacrifice 32...♔h8 followed by ...♖g8). Nielsen suggested 31.f3, intending to put the bishop on ♗f2 if necessary. Black could answer 31...♖c7 and continue playing.

But a stronger idea after 29.♔h2 is again 29...♔h8!, clearing g8 for the rook after 30.-- 30...♗f6 31.♗h6 ♖g8. Black is definitely much better, and the attack is strong even with such reduced material.

29...exf4 30.♔xg2 f3+ 31.♔f1

The king wants to get to the centre. It will be very well situated there after Black accepts the exchange sacrifice, but the outcome will not be the expected one.

31.♔h3 was probably more resistant, but the king is still weak on the h-file. After 31...♗xa1 32.♖xa1 Black has several good choices. The strongest seem to be 32...♖f6!, planning ...♔f7 and ...♖g8.



Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

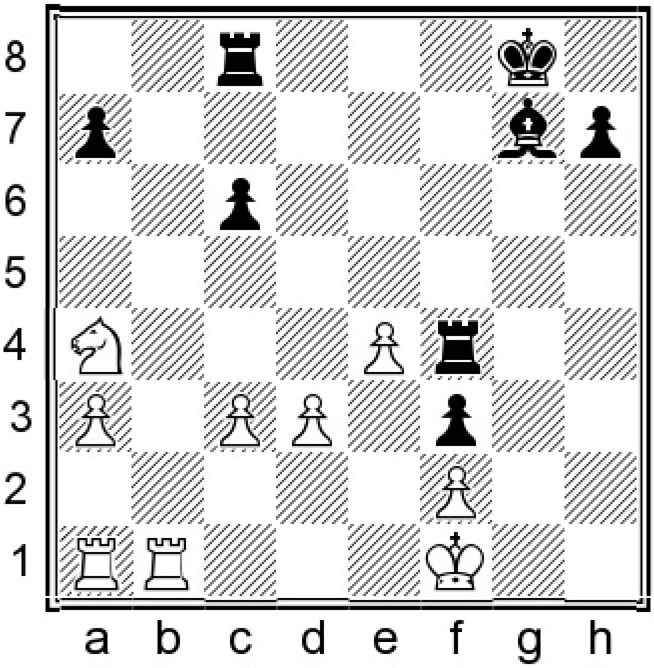
31...♖f4!!

A beautiful winning move. The black bishop became a strong attacking piece after 29.♗xf4. Black now threatens 32...♖h4, and the bishop will eventually get to h6, covering d2, if White tries ♔e1.

32.c3

White insists on moving his king to the queenside via e1-d1 and c2. The immediate 32.♔e1 loses to 32...♖d8! (32...♗h6! is also strong), e.g. 33.♔d2 ♖xe4 34.♘c3 ♗h6+ 35.♔d1 ♖h4 and mate.

Nothing changes after 33.♖a2 ♖h4 (threatening 34...♗h6) 34.♔d2 ♖xe4.



“Again, Carlsen finds the killing move,” said Nielsen.

Exercise: What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

32...♖d8!

The most accurate move; it prevents 33.♔e1 due to the obvious 33...♖xd3. Now White must weaken his structure, because 33.♖d1 loses to 33...♖h4 34.♔e1 ♗h6!. 32...♖h4 was also strong, but it is more “human” to bring an inactive piece to the attack.

33.d4

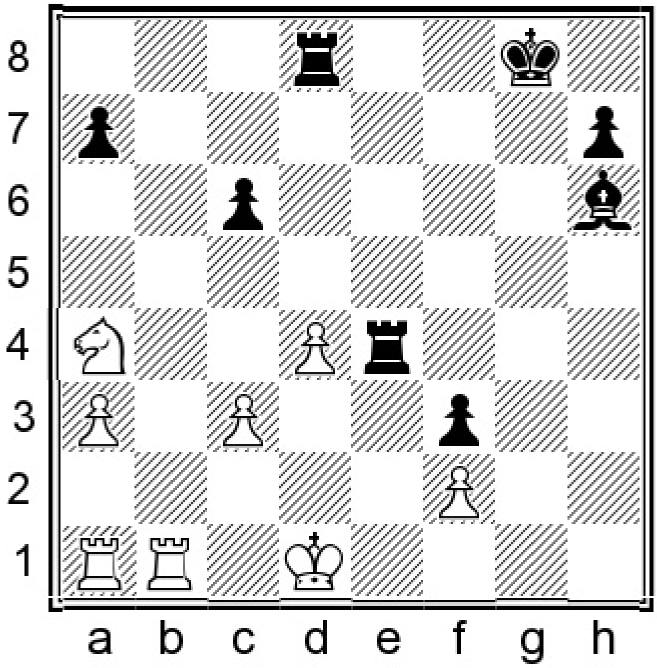
There are several winning moves, and Black needs to choose one of them.

33...♗h6

Carlsen continues with his analysed line, which is fine.

The engines find a prettier way (although they choose it because it is quicker): 33...♗xd4! 34.cxd4 ♖h4 35.♔g1 (if 35.♔e1 then 35...♖xd4) 35...♔h8! and mate follows.

34.♔e1 ♖xe4+ 35.♔d1



Exercise: What had Carlsen in mind?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

35...c5!

This was foreseen when 33...♗h6 was played; it wins material and continues the attack.

36.♔c2

If 36.♘xc5 then 36...♖e2 is lethal, because with the knight on c5 White has no ♖b2, and 37.♘d3 is met by 37...♖d2+.

36...cxd4 37.♔d3 ♖e2 38.c4 ♖xf2

Black is now two pawns to the good and with a better position.

39.♖d1

39.♖b2 ♖xb2 40.♘xb2 was more tenacious, but Black's position is winning, e.g. after 40...♖b8 41.♔c2 f2 followed by ...♗e3, when he has three passed pawns and his king can enter the game too, dealing with White's c-pawn if necessary.

39...♖e2

Planning 40.-- 40...♖e3+ 41.♔c2 d3+

0–1

Both players had “only” 3 points after five rounds prior to this encounter, and Carlsen needed to win games urgently to fight for first place.

This partly explains why he played so aggressively, taking great risks.

This approach is not very common in his games, but he was successful. His attack was stronger, even in the endgame, and he finished off the game with beautiful strokes.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) When there is a race between attacks on opposite wings, the most important factor is to be quicker. (11...♘h5! 21.♘h2? *21.♖fb1!* 21...f3!).

2.) When there is a race between attacks on opposite wings, speed may be more important than permanent weaknesses. (14...bxc5!).

3.) When there is a race between attacks on opposite wings, material is generally not so important. (17...g5! 18...g4! 31...♖f4!).

4.) Even with few pieces left on the board the king’s safety may be one of the most important factors. (27...♕xg5! 31...♖f4! 32...♖d8! 33...♗h6!).

5.) A large dose of both imagination and precise analysis is indispensable for conducting a successful attack. (31...♖f4! 32...♖d8!).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 12
Viswanathan Anand – Magnus Carlsen
Dutch Defence [A90]
Baden-Baden (4), 06.02.2015

1.d4 f5

Question: Carlsen playing the Dutch Defence? That’s rather surprising, isn’t it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: At this moment, after three rounds, Carlsen had “only” 50%, and yes, this was a rather surprising decision.

Carlsen had actually played the Dutch against Wojtaszek (one of Anand’s known seconds) a few days before in Wijk aan Zee (Carlsen lost), but in that game he chose a different move order: 1...d6 2.♘f3 g6 3.c4 f5.

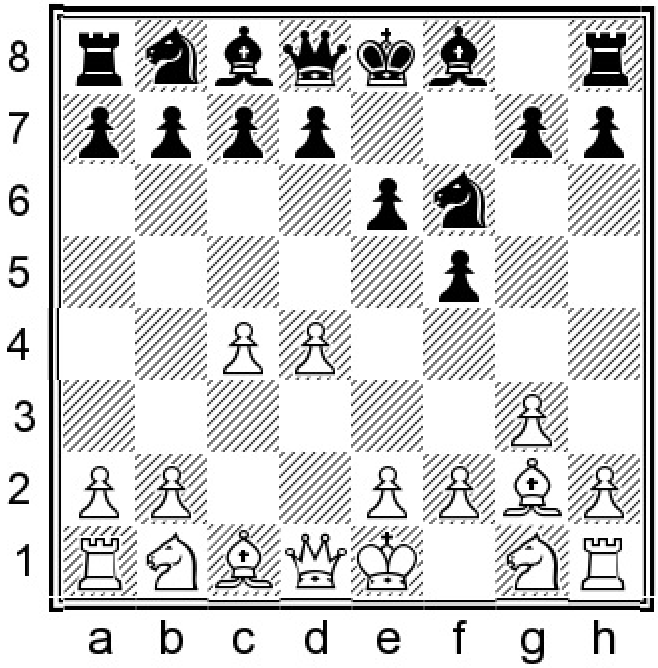
In a video for chess24.com five years later, Carlsen admitted that he had encountered problems facing

Anand with Black in “classical variations” during previous games, so, after the free day, not knowing what to play, he and his second opted for a Dutch, not trying to equalize, but just to get a fighting game. It was not an improvisation; we will talk about it later.

2.g3 ♘f6 3.♗g2 e6

This was the choice, the Stonewall Variation. Carlsen would have been familiar with it when he was taught by his former trainer, Simen Agdestein, who used to play it regularly, and of course he knew the classical games from Botvinnik among others.

4.c4



4...c6

Question: If he is going to play the Stonewall, why not immediately play 4...d5?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: 4...c6 is a useful move made to avoid a line that Anand liked to play, 5.♘h3. Anand had won all his games in that move order and one of its ideas is to prepare ♗f4 if Black plays ...♗d6.

We will talk more about this in the next game.

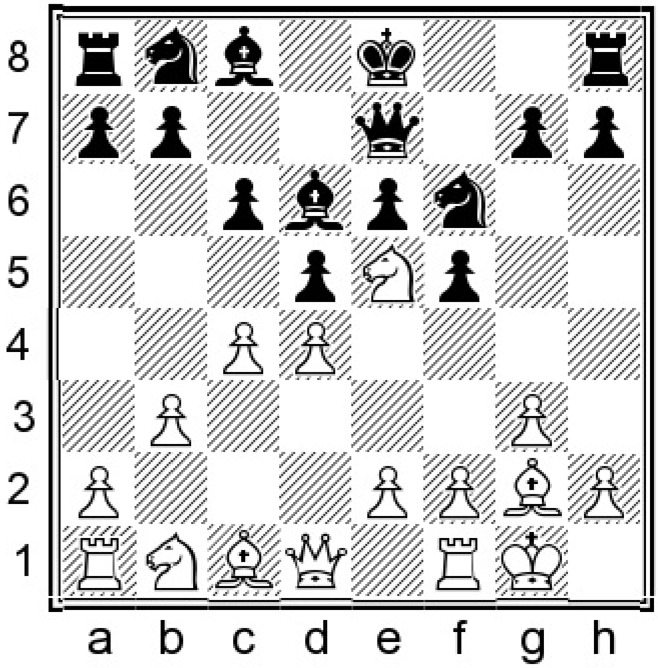
5.♘f3

If 5.♘h3, Black can “change his mind” and play 5...d6, trying to show that the knight is in a dubious location, as he cannot move to e5 via f4-d3 anymore.

5...d5 6.0-0 ♗d6 7.b3 ♕e7

Black stops the positional threat 8.♗a3, exchanging Black’s “good” bishop.

8.♘e5



This interesting move order was played by Van Wely against Carlsen himself in Wijk aan Zee, 2012. White delays the development of his queenside to avoid a concrete line after 8...b6.

8...0-0

In that game from 2012, Carlsen played 8...b6 anyway; after 9.cxd5 he replied automatically 9...cxd5?! (9...exd5 is better, but “it is not great for Black,” said Carlsen). White showed the idea of 8.♘e5: here he can play 10.♘c4!, capturing Black’s best bishop.

9.♘d2 a5

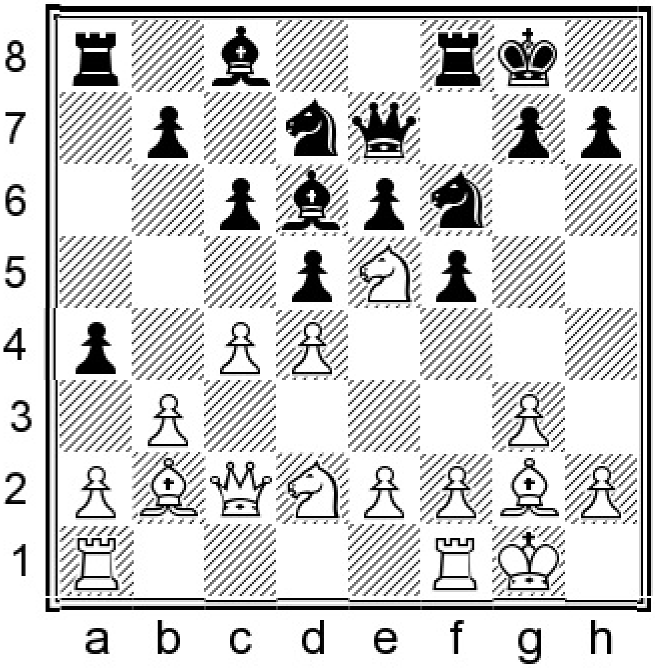
“Pretty standard,” said Carlsen. The knight’s move to d2 invites this advance.

10.♗b2 ♘bd7

If 10...b6 then again 11.cxd5 cxd5?! 12.♘dc4!. This explains why Agdestein tried the apparently odd move 10...♖a7, leaving the long diagonal to play 11...b6 without risk.

There is also 10...♘e4, preparing 11...b6.

11.♕c2 a4



Question: I guess that Black’s risky approach you mentioned before is about something positional, so tell me what was going on.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Let Nielsen give you an explanation: “Black is solid, the only problem being the ‘Stonewall’ bishop on c8. Placing the pawn on a4 adds some tension, as it is Black who chooses when to either push ...a3 or exchange with ...axb3.”

12.♘df3

A different idea is 12.♖ab1, ceding the a1 square to the bishop if necessary.

Question: I guess 12.bxa4 isn’t good, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Well, it isn’t so clear. The engines liked it, and Carlsen said “I don’t think there is a definite answer.”

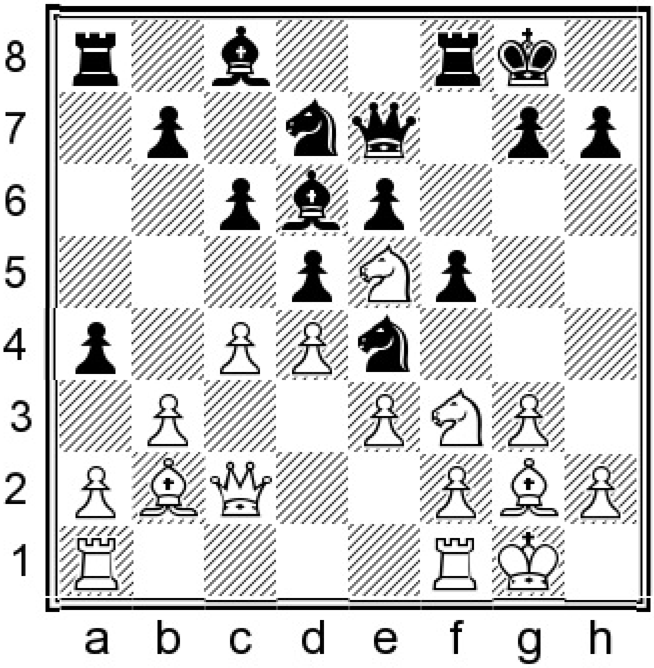
White is a pawn up, but that is not important yet, though “better a pawn more than a pawn less”, as we have already heard Najdorf’s aunt say.

Black could play in several ways. Carlsen mentioned 12...♗xe5 13.dxe5 ♘g4 14.♘f3 and now 14...♘b6, remembering that after bxa4 the c4-square was weakened. He also mentioned simply 12...♘e4.

So 12.bxa4 was playable, or, as Carlsen said after the game, “it is not as stupid as it looks.”

12...♘e4 13.e3

13.bxa4 has also been played, although in Goganov – Sandipan, Moscow 2013, White didn’t follow up well. The game continued 13...♗xe5 14.dxe5?! ♘b6 15.cxd5 exd5 16.♖ab1 ♘c4 17.♖fd1 ♕b4! 18.♘d4 ♕xa4 19.♘b3? ♕xa2 and 0–1 in 29 moves. It was a total triumph for Black, taking advantage of the weakened c4 square.



In the video mentioned, Carlsen commented that it is always a debatable question whether the move e3 is the best. It stops ...f4, but on the other hand the plan ...g5-g4 now makes more sense, not with the prime idea of attacking (not ruling that out either), but above all to cement the e4-knight, as now the move f3 will not be effective in expulsing the knight.

13...a3

Question: Why did Carlsen eliminate the tension?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen himself shared your doubts. After the game he called this move “a little bit overzealous,” and later even “ridiculous,” but this pawn will give him the full point.

Five years later, Carlsen said that these days, after AlphaZero, nobody could be surprised seeing this move. It is impossible to say for sure whether this advance creates a strong pawn on a3 or a weak point on a3, but when he played it, he was simply continuing with his plan, playing a fighting game.

In the post mortem, Carlsen suggested an alternative, 13...♘xe5 14.♘xe5 ♗d7, with a reasonable position for Black.

14.♗c3 ♘xe5 15.♘xe5 ♗d7

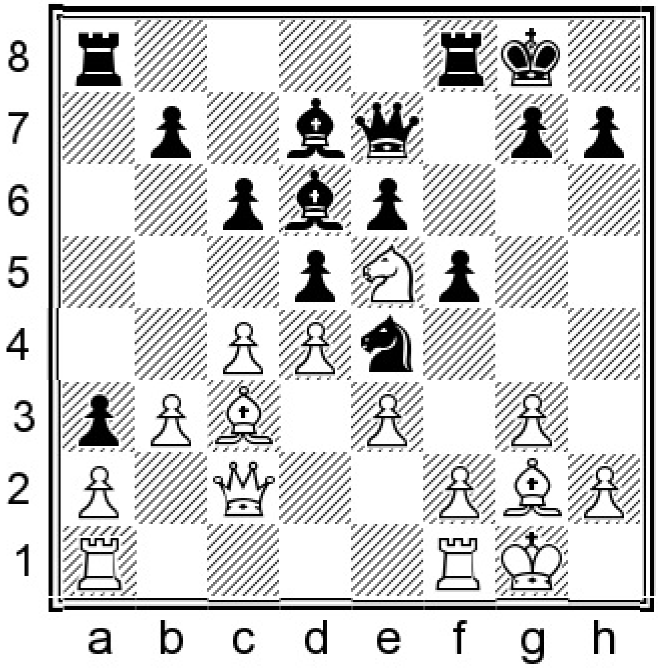
Carlsen’s first idea was 15...♗xe5 16.dxe5, and, after eliminating the strong e5-knight, to play ...b5. That is logical and attractive, but after going into concrete variations Carlsen concluded “but I don’t think it is very good.”

If 16...♘xc3 17.♕xc3 b5 18.cxd5 cxd5 then 19.♖fc1 follows, dominating the open file, and the a3 pawn could easily become a weakness. “I am a little worse,” he concluded.

He was not convinced by a different move order, either: 16...b5 17.cxb5 cxb5 18.♖fc1, and now, after 18...♗a6, White would not play the attractive and apparently strong 19.♗d4?!: if 19...♖fc8 then 20.♕d3 is better for White, while after 19...b4 20.♗xe4 fxe4 21.♗c5 White wins the exchange but his kingside is weak and Black has good attacking chances after 21...♕f7 22.♗xf8 ♖xf8, threatening 23...♕f3 followed by 24...♗e2 and the f2-pawn drops, while 23.♕d2 is met by 23...♕f3 24.♕e1 h5! (planning ...h4-h3) 25.h4 g5!, etc.

Carlsen disregarded this line because he thought d4 was not the right square for the bishop. If 18...♗a6 White should play 19.♗e1!, then after 19...♖fc8 20.♕d1 Black has many weaknesses. White would play ♗f1, and the advance ...b4 would only create a new weakness.

These are not forced lines, but we can understand the bad feelings the world champion had about his initial idea.



16.♘xd7

Question: Now it’s Anand who eliminates the tension, exchanging his strong knight. Why?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Let the world champion answer you: “This ♘xd7 idea is known from ... a game from Flohr, I believe [against Goldberg in 1949]. He simply took on d7, played c5 and won in the end. I think the circumstances were different but I think this was Vishy’s idea,” said Carlsen after the game. Everyone was astonished when he said he had seen that idea in the book by John Watson *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy*.

This is not similar to the move 22.♘xd7+!! from Fischer – Petrosian, Buenos Aires 1971, mentioned in *Magnus Wins With White.* In that game, White also exchanges a powerful knight for a “bad” bishop and increases his advantage, but here the intention is more modest: after c5 White wants to open up the position with b4-b5 to take advantage of his bishop pair.

16...♕xd7 17.c5 ♗c7 18.b4 h5

“I have to say I regretted the move 18...h5 later in the game,” said Carlsen after it was over. The obvious idea is to play ...h4 and take on g3, then the e4-knight would be difficult to expulse, because g3 would be unprotected.

Carlsen also considered the idea we talked about before, 18...g5, with the plan of playing...g4; he thought it was promising for Black. In 2020, this is what the engines prefer.

Nonetheless, five years after the game, in the mentioned video, Carlsen supported his chosen move.

19.♗e1

If 19.b5 then 19...h4, while after 19.f3 ♘xc3 20.♕xc3 h4 21.f4 Black would play 21...g5 “This should be sufficient counterplay,” said Carlsen after the game. His intuition is backed up by the engines from 2020: there is enough counterplay on the kingside.

19...e5

Carlsen decides to open up the centre. The alternative was 19...h4, which in some way would justify 19.♗e1, but Black has enough counterplay after 20.gxh4 f4, or 20.f3 ♘f6 21.gxh4 f4 22.exf4. Black is fine after 22...♘h5.

20.dxe5

This move opens up the position and allows the c7-bishop to enter the game. This was different from Flohr’s initial idea when playing ♘xd7.

The engines prefer to follow the original idea, playing “Flohr’s plan” with 20.f3 ♘f6 21.b5, when chances would be balanced.

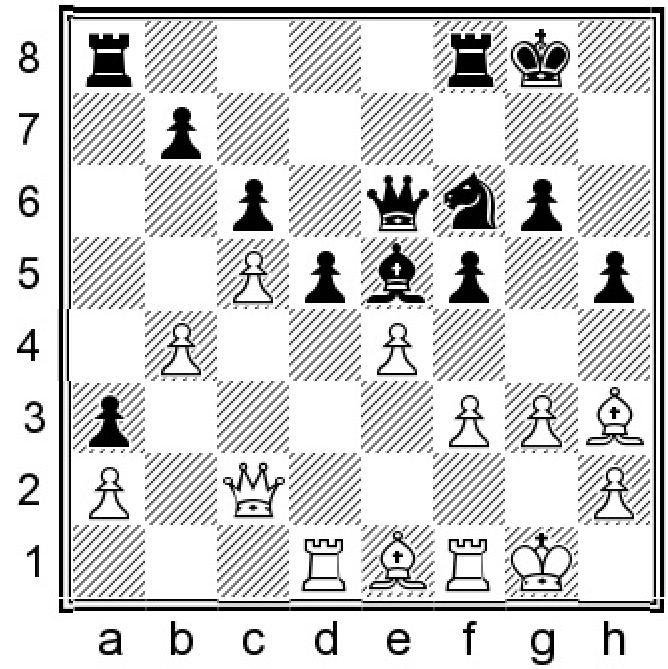
20...♗xe5 21.♖d1

“This is the critical position,” said Carlsen after the game, and added that his moves were “semi-forced”; White threatens to take twice on e4.

21...♕e6 22.f3 ♘f6 23.♗h3

Black’s structure seems about to collapse.

23...g6 24.e4



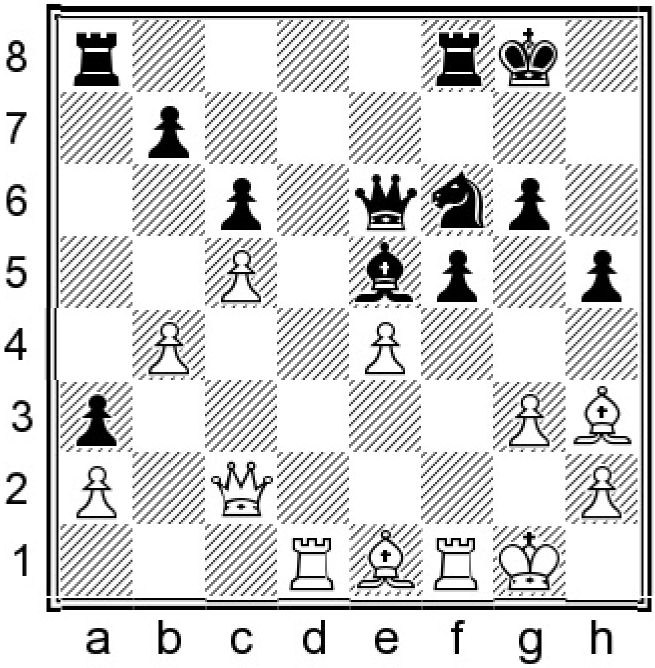
Question: White’s position seems clearly better to me, isn’t that correct?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: British grandmaster Matthew Sadler commented that in the pre-computer era this type of position was considered very good for White, based on general considerations. White has the initiative, and has strong pressure on the kingside, but now this must be confirmed by concrete calculation.

For that calculation, it is essential to evaluate the presence of the pawn on a3. Without it, White may claim some advantage, but not significant. You can put the a3-pawn on a7 and see what the engines think. Yet Black is not really worse, because there is a concrete solution there, too.

24...dxe4 25.fxe4



Exercise: How did Carlsen justify his previous moves?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

25...♗b2!

“There are of course some pretty serious risks involved with playing ...♗b2.” (Carlsen). The big reward is to be able to take the a2-pawn and get a strong passed pawn on a3.

This decision taken by the world champion was called by Matthew Sadler “The Defence of the 21st Century”. It is supported by calculation and a reasonable evaluation of the risks taken.

Here we see the importance of the a3-pawn.

Carlsen pointed out the alternative 25...♘g4 26.exf5 ♖xf5 27.♖xf5 gxf5, “and I think that Black is fine, for sure.” He is absolutely right.

This would be the best continuation with our little experiment, putting the a3 pawn on a7.

So, we may deduce that Carlsen had no reason to regret his move 18...h5, because it made the good defensive move ...♘g4 possible in some variations.

26.exf5 ♕xa2

Threatening 27...♗d4+. “I might have overestimated my position,” said Magnus at the press conference.

Indeed, the position of his king is scary, but if he manages to trade queens, his pawn will get promoted. The analysis showed that with correct play by both sides the game should have ended in a draw.

27.♗f2

Carlsen also considered 27.♔h1?!, and then he has 27...♖ad8! with an advantage, e.g.: 28.fxg6?! ♖xd1 29.♕xd1 ♕d5+ and 28.♖xd8?! ♖xd8 29.fxg6 ♕d5+ 30.♗g2 ♕d3 lose.

A better move is 27.♖f2, which makes the pin stronger and contains several ideas. One is ♗c3, another is ♗f1 (indeed, 27...g5? is bad due to 28.♗f1!) and also fxg6.

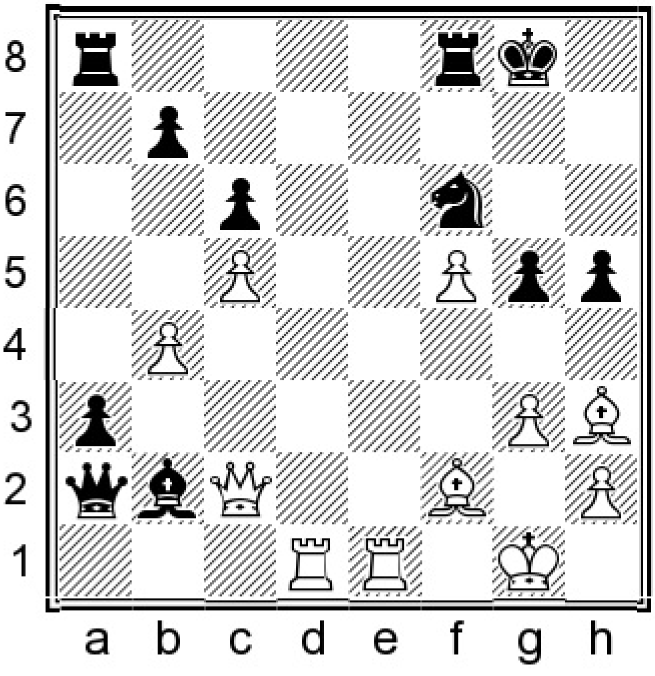
Anyway, Black is fine after 27...♖ad8!. It's a highly complex position, hard to calculate at the board, for example 28.♖xd8 ♖xd8 29.♗c3 ♘d5 30.f6 ♔f7, 31.♕d1 maintaining the tension is possible, as is 31.♗xb2 looking for equality.

In this line the tempting 31.♗e6+? ♔xe6 32.♕xg6 loses to 32...♕a1+ 33.♔g2 ♘e3+ 34.♔h3 ♗xc3 35.f7+ ♗f6.

27...g5

Objectively Black is safer now, after avoiding fxg6, but at the board the situation was still unclear.

28.♖fe1



White's position looks menacing. He threatens both 29.♗f1 and 29.♖e6.

Exercise: How to play now?

Show/Hide Solution

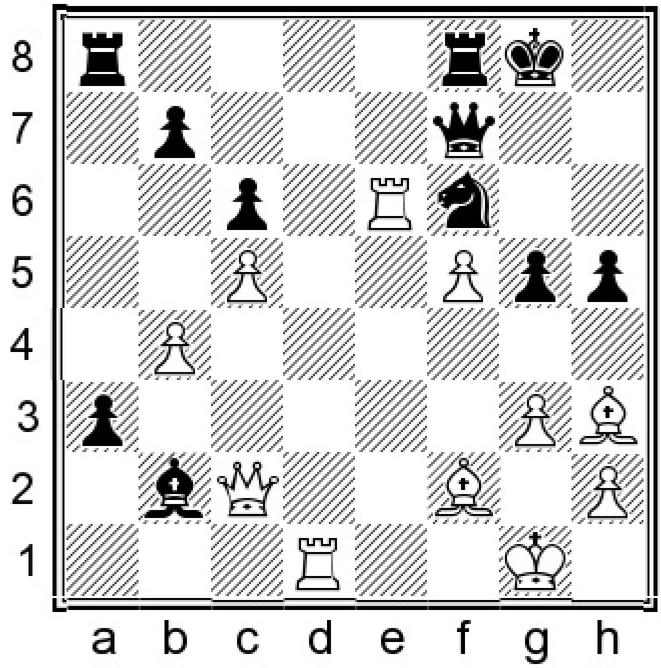
Answer:

28...♕f7

“First things first”. This is a sensible retreat, considering the threat 29.♗f1. Now Black would reply 29...♘d5! with an advantage, as the f5-pawn is lost.

29.♖e6

“More or less forced,” said Carlsen.



Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

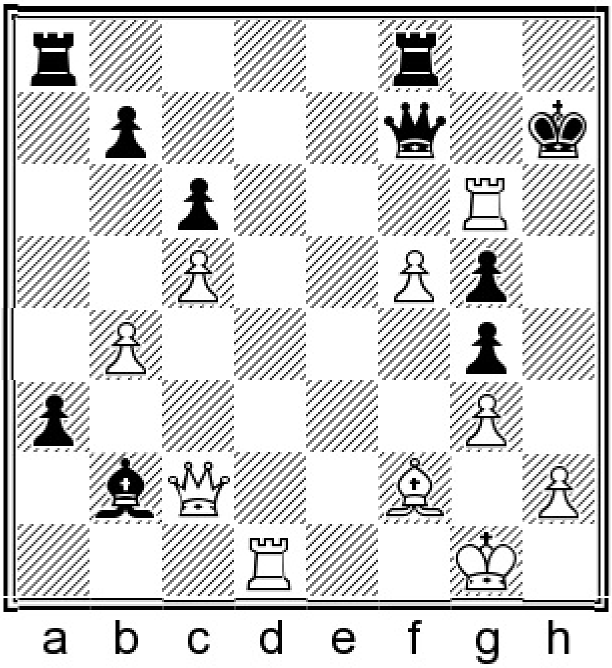
Answer:

29...♘g4!

Carlsen was already in time trouble. When asked about this move, which allows ♖g6+, he answered, “I thought about it for a long time here. It feels like my position should be quite good, but long term... well, there is no long term here, as within a few moves he could get the bishop round to c4. I realized that there’s a huge chance I would be embarrassingly mated here, but I couldn’t see it, so, you know, I had to go for it.” He added that he had to get rid of the f-pawn as soon as possible.

29...♔h8! and 29...♖fe8! were less complicated alternatives, and also good, but at the board what Carlsen chose is attractive.

30.♗xg4 hxg4 31.♖g6+ ♔h7



32.♖d7??

Anand had significantly more time on the clock, but played this losing move after only 52 seconds.

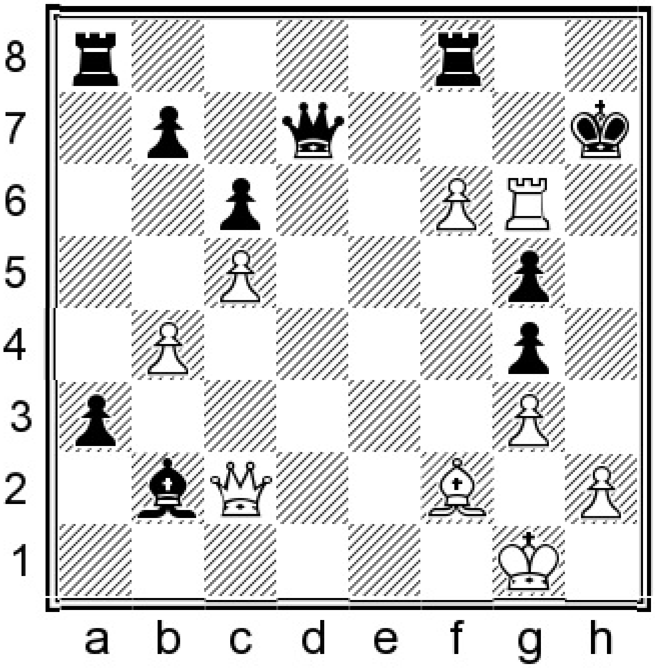
32.♖e6! was the best move. Carlsen was expecting it, and no matter what computers say, at the board anything could happen.

“This is Vishy’s territory – positions where you have the attack,” commented Aronian. 32...♕xf5 33.♖d7+ leads to a draw by perpetual check thanks to checks with the rook on g6 and h6.

After the game, Magnus suggested the move 32...♗f6, when White has 33.♖xf6! (not 33.♕a2 ♗g7!) 33...♕xf6 34.♖d7+ ♖f7 (or 34...♔h8 35.♗d4) 35.♗d4!, and Black is fine in the ending with a queen against two rooks after 35...♕xd4+ 36.♖xd4 a2 37.♖d1 a1=♕ 38.♖xa1 ♖xa1+, but we could still expect a long game ahead.

32...♖fe8! 33.♖ed6 ♔g8! was more promising, and Black can still play for a win. Then 34.♖g6+? ♔f8 is wrong, because Black’s king is safe, so White has to play 34.♗d4, and after 34...♗xd4+ 35.♖6xd4 a2 36.♖a1 Black is still pressing after e.g. 36...♖e5.

32...♕xd7 33.f6



Exercise: How did Carlsen refute the combination?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

33...♕d1+!

Not the only refutation, but the prettiest one, clearing the board.

This move slightly reminds us of 28...♕e1! from our Game 9, also between Anand and Carlsen.

Not 33...♔h8?? 34.♖h6+, but 33...♖xf6! was also good.

34.♕xd1 ♔xg6

Two rooks for the queen, but the a-pawn makes all the difference. The black king is safe, and the lonely queen will not give perpetual check.

35.♕d3+ ♔h6 36.h4 gxh3

0–1

Carlsen went for a fighting game since the first moves, and he got what he wanted, a complex fight, but with risks.

"I think this is modern chess, very concrete," said Carlsen. At the end, White seemed to be better, but he wasn't. He needed to obtain a draw and he had nothing more, but even in top games mistakes happen.

"It was a great fighting game, it gave me a good feeling for the rest of the tournament and about the Stonewall in general just to be able to get that kind of fight," was Carlsen's summary of the game and the opening chosen.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) A strategic disadvantage like a "bad bishop" urgently needs something in return. (9...a5!).

2.) It's essential to know the typical ideas in the chosen opening. (*8...b6?)*.

3.) Study the Classics! (16.♘xd7! 17.c5!).

4.) Take note of what Sadler calls "The Defence of the 21st Century", it is based on calculation and an adequate evaluation of the risks assumed. (25...♗b2! 29...♘g4!).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Show in Text Mode

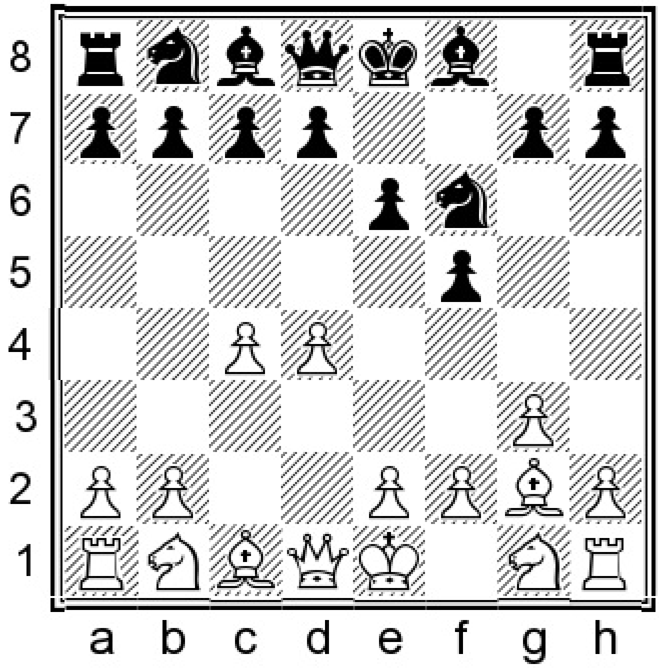
Game 13
Fabiano Caruana – Magnus Carlsen
Dutch Defence [A90]
Gashimov Memorial, Shamkir (3), 19.04.2015

1.d4 f5

It was said that this move could have hardly surprised Caruana, as Carlsen had already played the Dutch more than once that year.

It did though, and Caruana thought a lot in the initial phase of the game.

2.g3 ♘f6 3.♗g2 e6 4.c4



4...c6

Still following his win against Anand in Baden-Baden that we saw in Game 12.

As we know, this is a useful waiting move, without Black having to decide yet what to do with the d7–pawn.

But, all things can change. In a second video for chess24.com, Carlsen said that he wasn't sure if this move was really necessary, because in some positions, after 4...d5, Black could play ...b6 and ...♗b7, and maybe ...c5 later, in just one move. Then the c6 square would even be accessible to the b8–knight.

In this second video, he also said that he didn't have a clear opinion of what was best, 4...c6 or 4...d5, and later, in a third video, he recommended 4...d5.

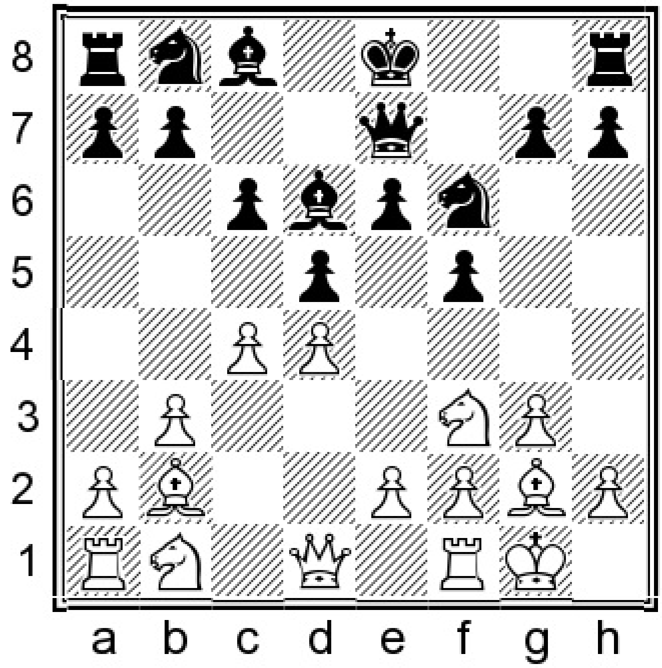
5.♘f3 d5 6.0-0 ♗d6 7.b3 ♕e7 8.♗b2

Deviating from 8.♘e5 0-0 9.♘d2 a5 10.♗b2 ♘bd7 11.♕c2 a4 that we saw in Anand – Carlsen.

We know that after 8.♘e5 the move 8...b6 runs into 9.cxd5 cxd5 10.♘c4!, which is considered better for White. However, Carlsen also expresses a different opinion in the second video mentioned: Black's position after 10...♘c6 11.♘xd6+ ♕xd6 12.♗a3 ♘b4 13.♘d2 "isn't too bad, but not great either."

In the fourth part (the series about the Stonewall has an introduction and four parts) he showed that, in general, Black can do fine even after the exchange of the dark-squared bishops.

The impression I got is that his strong faith in the Stonewall increased after each new episode of the series.



Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

8...b6

Now there is no ♘c4 and Black can develop his c8-bishop to b7 without hindrance.

9.♘e5 ♗b7 10.♘d2

Question: Why to d2? Isn’t it better to play 10.♘c3?

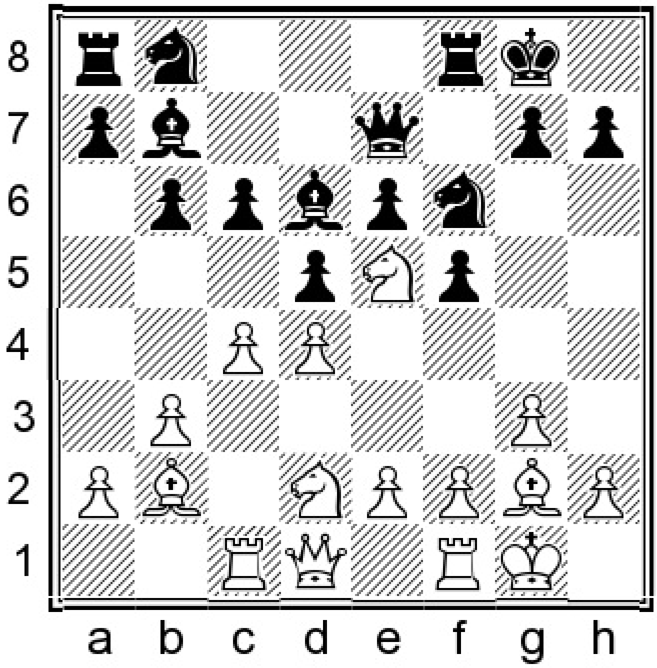
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: In the videos, Carlsen showed examples where he definitely liked to play the Stonewall, especially when White plays this knight to c3. The reason is that the knight on c3 is further from e5 than when it’s on d2.

We will see more about this in the next moves.

If 10.♘c3 Black would play 10...♘bd7, forcing White to make a decision about his e5-knight.

10...0-0 11.♖c1



11...a5

Question: Why not 11...♘bd7?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen reminded us of what Dvoretsky defined as the “superfluous knight” in his books.

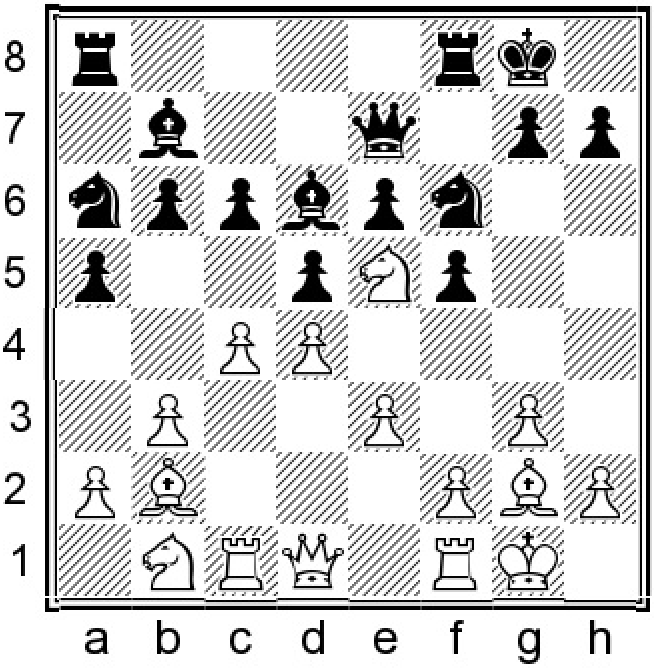
To recap, it arises in a situation like this, where both white knights have only one ideal square, e5, so playing 11...♘bd7 allowing the exchange of knights would theoretically favour White. Hence “it makes sense to put the knight on a6,” said Carlsen.

This move has been played many times, among others by his former trainer Agdestein.

12.e3 ♘a6 13.♘b1!

Carlsen praised this move played “After thinking for quite a bit.” It was a novelty. The knight sees no future on f3 and heads for c3.

This is the first choice of the engines in July 2020; 13.♕e2 was the usual move.



“The knight is coming to c3 and possibly to a4, targeting the weakness that I have just created on b6,” said Carlsen. He added that the development of all his pieces looks fairly harmonious, so, he asked “The question is now what?”

Exercise: What would you play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

13...♗xe5

We see again how Carlsen thinks independently. He made a surprising exchange.

“A concrete solution,” is how he described this move. It was played after a long think, although he didn’t believe it was that great for Black, objectively speaking, but not bad either.

“It feels I am not really in time for ...c5 stuff, because after 13...c5 14.cxd5 exd5 the d5–pawn would be a target, and it didn’t look appealing at all.”

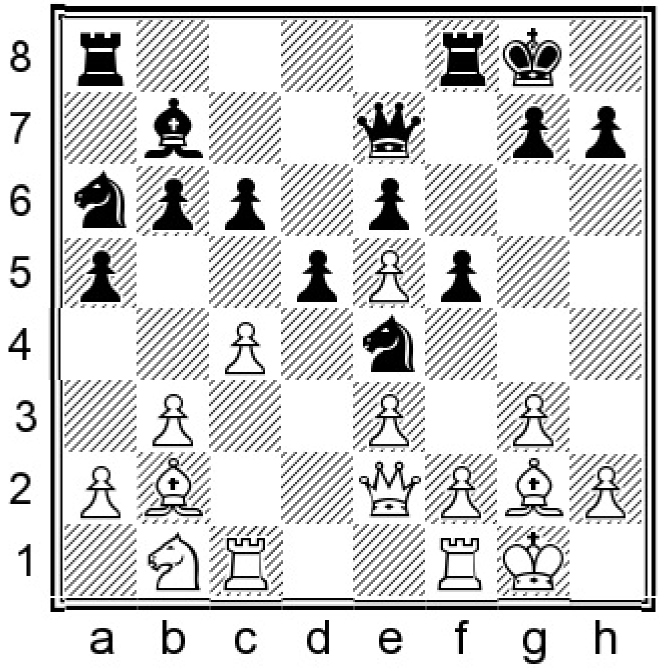
He probably didn’t even consider one of the main suggestions of the engines, 13...♘b8.

14.dxe5 ♘e4 15.♕e2

Question: But tell me, what was the point of exchanging his best bishop?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: He explained that the point of Black’s idea is that after 15.cxd5 exd5 the b2–bishop is out of the game. If 16.f3 then the knight naturally heads via 16...♘g5 to e6 and Black is doing pretty well, while after 16.♘c3 ♘ac5 Black is also fine.



Exercise: What do you think Carlsen played?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

15...a4

“I decided just to take action,” said Carlsen.

He rejected 15...c5 because he thought this plan only works after White takes on d5 (and the e4–knight has e6 available as a destination), and gave this line as example: 16.f3 ♘g5 17.♘c3 ♘c7 18.♘a4 calling it “a bit awkward,” and in general, without having e6, the knights are not well situated. White could consider h4 followed by f4, and press against d5: it “all looks passive, to be honest.”

15...a4 is the first choice of the engines.

16.♘c3

This move allows Black to equalise without any difficulties.

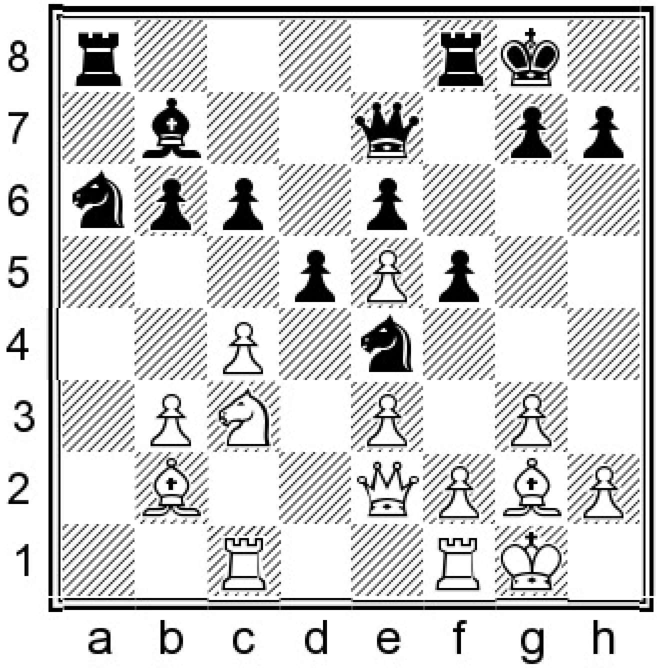
The b2-bishop is not dangerous now, so an idea was to try to activate it with ♗a3, e.g. 16.f3 ♘g5 17.♗a3, but Black seems to have a decent position after 17...c5 18.cxd5 ♗xd5! (not 18...exd5?!, because 19.bxa4!, followed by ♖fd1 and ♘c3 is unpleasant) 19.bxa4 ♘c7 20.♘c3 ♗c6.

Carlsen expected 16.bxa4, where he believed White was a bit better after 16...♘ac5 (16...c5 17.a5) 17.f3 ♘g5 18.♗a3, although after 18...♖xa4, as he said, Black's disadvantage is minimal.

16...axb3

The engines propose 16...a3 17.♗a1 ♘b4. This might be playable, but it seems too passive for a practical player. Carlsen chooses a "human" path.

17.axb3



Exercise (easy): What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

17...♕b4

Carlsen again plays the most logical move for a human: he attacks the weakness created on b3.

The engines also like 17...♘b4, with the idea of playing ...♘c5, but, even if it holds, that move is difficult to play at the board. It requires various calculations, whereas the chosen move delivers equality without the need to calculate much.

18.♘xe4 dxe4

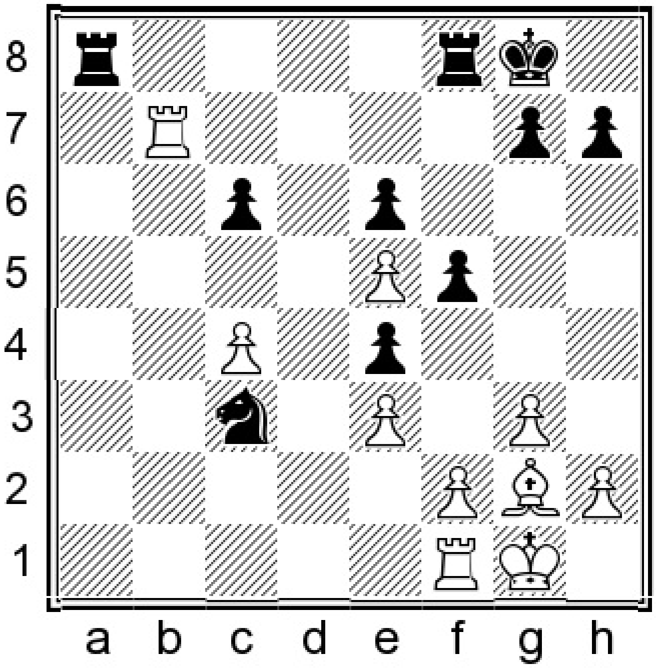
"Now the knight is coming to c5 and d3, and Black is comfortable," said Carlsen.

If 18...fxe4 then 19.♗h3 is unpleasant, e.g.19...♖fe8 20.f4 ♘c5? 21.f5!, and White unexpectedly gets a strong attack.

19.♕c2 ♘c5 20.♗c3

Now a forced simplification leads to an equal ending, which should finish in a draw as both players believed. However, the practical aspect was also beginning to be important, as White was in time trouble.

20...♕xb3 21.♕xb3 ♘xb3 22.♖b1 ♘c5 23.♖xb6 ♘a4 24.♖xb7 ♘xc3



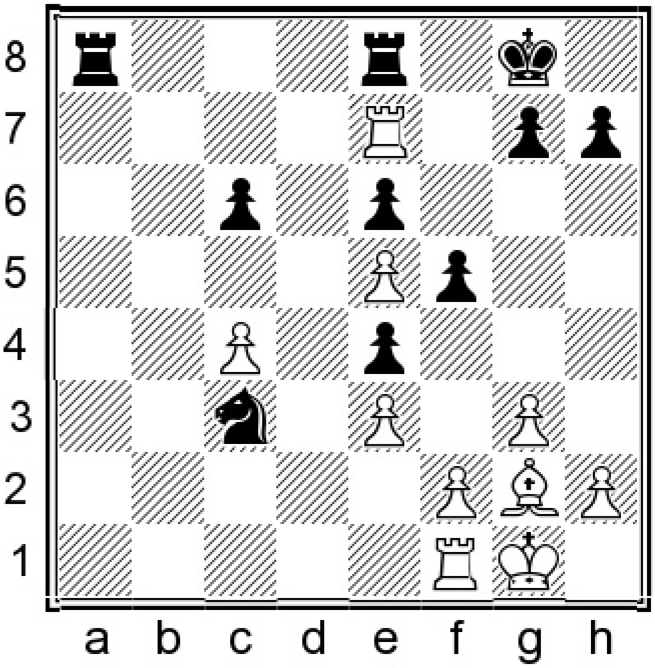
Carlsen pointed out that the bishop on g2 may sometimes turn into a really bad piece, like in this position.

Black has a strong knight, but it will not be enough to gain an advantage because Black cannot create threats soon enough. Besides, White has an active rook as compensation, and Black's seventh rank is almost always weak after 1...f5.

25.♖e7

This move is enough to maintain equality; it was also possible to play 25.f3. Black wouldn't play 25...exf3 activating the bishop, but after e.g. 25...♖a2 White would play 26.fxe4 fxe4 followed by a timely ♗h3, maybe even immediately, holding the balance.

25...♖fe8

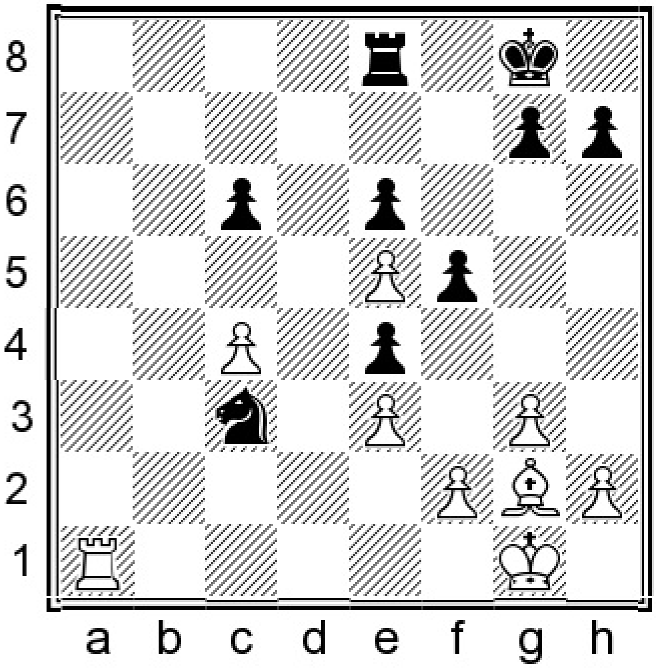


26.♖xe8+?!

White voluntarily exchanges his active rook; it is enough to draw, but a small concession. White could play 26.♖c7 ♖ac8 27.♖a7 and stay on the seventh rank “forever”.

26...♖xe8 27.♖a1?!

The same commentary as before: this move maintains equality. However, 27.f3! “was an immediate draw. I was very surprised at the way that things happened,” said Carlsen. The game could continue 27...♖d8 28.fxe4 ♘xe4 (or 28...fxe4 29.♗h3) 29.♗xe4 fxe4 30.♖f4.



Exercise: We know that the ending should be a dead draw, so how did Carlsen create (very slight) practical chances?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

27...♖d8

Trying to infiltrate and harass his opponent. Carlsen knew that the logical result was a draw, but (like Lasker, Fischer and other champions) why not continue trying?

28.♗f1

White plays the safest move, covering e2. Other moves may also equalize, but they need precise calculation and he didn't have much time left on the clock.

28.f3?! only brings headaches after 28...♖d1+! 29.♖xd1 ♘xd1 30.fxe4 ♘xe3, and Black is better, as the pawn ending after 31.exf5? is lost, e.g. 31...♘xg2 32.♔xg2 exf5 33.♔f3 ♔f7 34.♔e3 c5 (34...g5 also wins) 35.♔f3 ♔e6 36.♔f4 h6, when Black has more tempos in reserve and wins.

28.♖a6 is better than 28.f3, but 28...♘e2+ 29.♔f1 ♘c1 30.♔g1 doesn't deliver an immediate draw either: Black can continue playing after 30...♘d3 31.♖xc6 ♖e8 followed by 32...♘xe5.

28...c5

Caruana thought that the position was a draw in almost any case. He said "The next idea was a disaster," which may be true only in the practical sense, because it should still finish in a draw.

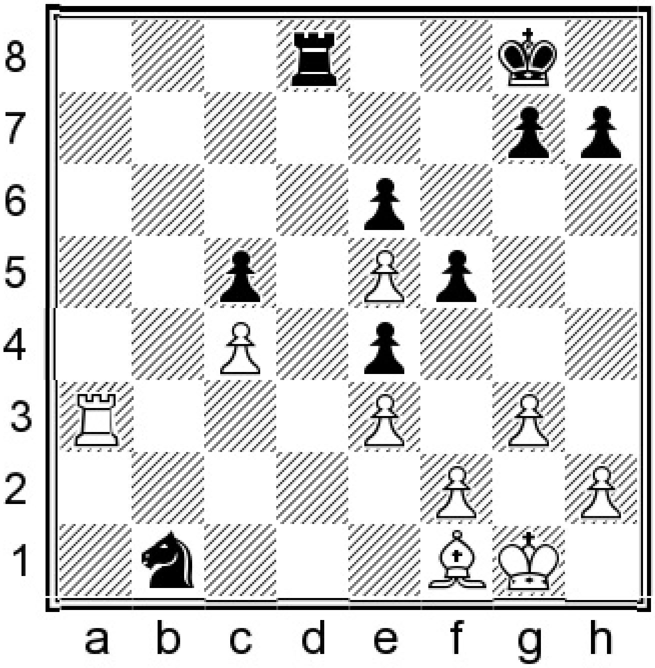
29.♖a3

This is still a move that holds the position.

29.♖a5 was mentioned by both players at the press conference. 29...♖d2 worried Caruana, but Carlsen thought it didn't deliver anything after 30.♖xc5 ♘d1 31.♖c8+ ♔f7 32.♖c7+ ♔f8 33.♖c8+ ♔e7 34.♖c7+ ♔d8 35.♖xg7 ♘xf2 36.c5 ♘g4 37.♗b5.

Black could try 29...♖d1 30.♖xc5 ♘b1 31.♖c6 (31.♖c8+ ♔f7 32.♔g2 ♘d2 33.♖d8 was also enough) 31...♘d2 32.♖d6 ♖xf1+ 33.♔g2 ♖d1 34.c5 ♖c1 35.♖xd2 ♖xc5. "I could not see anything better," said Carlsen. Black takes the e5-pawn, but the result should be a draw.

29...♘b1

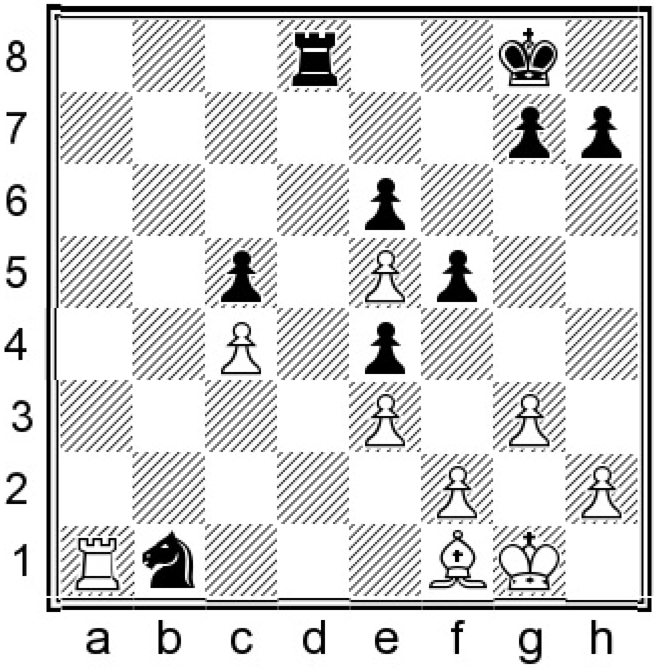


30.♖a1

White must decide between defence and attack. The "problem", as Caruana said, is that all lines seem enough for a draw.

Both 30.♖a5 and 30.♖a6 are also possible, and after 30...♖d1 there are many lines. However, after the simple 31.♖a1 it's not clear how Black can make progress. White will play ♔g2 and counterattack with his rook.

White could also play 31.♖a8+ first and give checks till the black king reaches an awkward place like g6, and only then ♖a1, or White could also play safely with (31...♔f7) 32.♔g2, and if 32...♘d2 then again 33.♖d8.



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue to create problems for White?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

30...♘d2!

Now White must decide quickly what to do against the planned 31...♘f3+.

31.♗e2??

And finally, Caruana makes a serious error. He had to play 31.♔g2!, and the black army cannot create anything serious, e.g. 31...♘f3 32.♖a6 ♔f7 33.♖a7+ ♔f8 34.♖c7 ♖d1 35.♖c8+ (better than 35.♖xc5 ♘d2 36.♗e2 ♖e1) 35...♔f7 36.♖c7+ ♔g6 (after 36...♔e8? 37.♖xg7 ♘d2 38.♗e2 ♖e1 the bishop has the h5 square) 37.♖c6!, threatening the e6-pawn and keeping ♖d6 in reserve to pin the knight if Black plays ...♘d2.

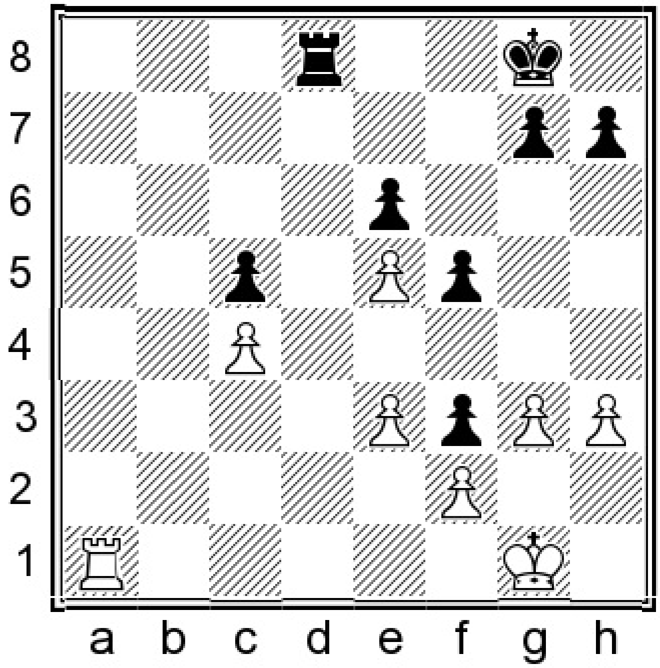
31...♘f3+ 32.♗xf3

32.♔g2 ♘xe5 is also depressing.

32...exf3

Carlsen also said that the rook ending is really difficult for White.

33.h3



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue to make progress?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

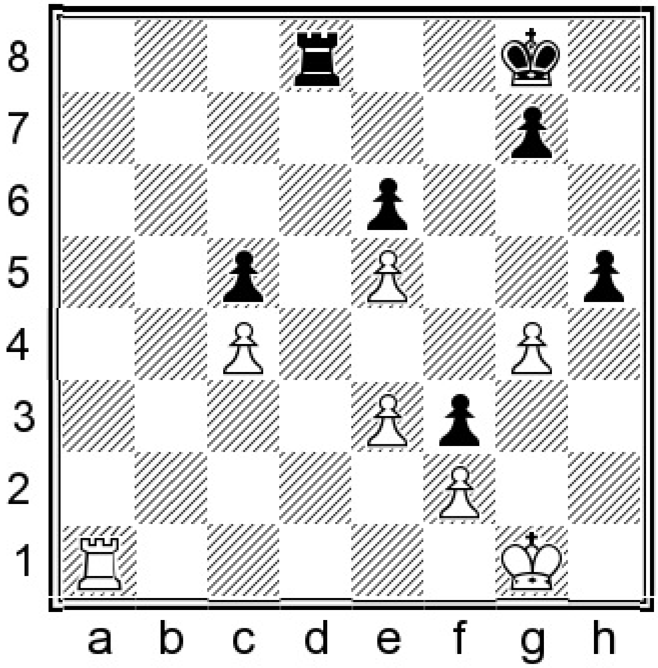
33...h5!

Preventing White from playing g4 for free.

34.g4

Now the counterattack 34.♖a6 doesn't save White. Play may continue 34...♖d1+ 35.♔h2 ♖f1 36.♖xe6 (or 36.♖a2 ♖c1) 36...♖xf2+ 37.♔g1 ♖g2+ 38.♔f1 ♖xg3, with a won ending.

34...fxg4 35.hxg4



Exercise: What was Carlsen’s idea?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

35...h4!

Preventing the white king from entering the game.

36.♔h2

Black wins after 36.g5 ♔h7 37.♖a6 ♖d1+ 38.♔h2 ♖f1 39.♖xe6 ♖xf2+ 40.♔h3 ♖c2 (threatening 41...♖c1), followed by 41...♖xc4.

If 37.♔h2 there could follow 37...♔g6 38.♔h3 ♔h5! 39.♖g1 ♖d2 40.♖g4 ♖xf2 41.♖xh4+ ♔xg5 42.♖f4 ♖c2 43.♖xf3 ♖xc4, with effectively two pawns more and a won ending.

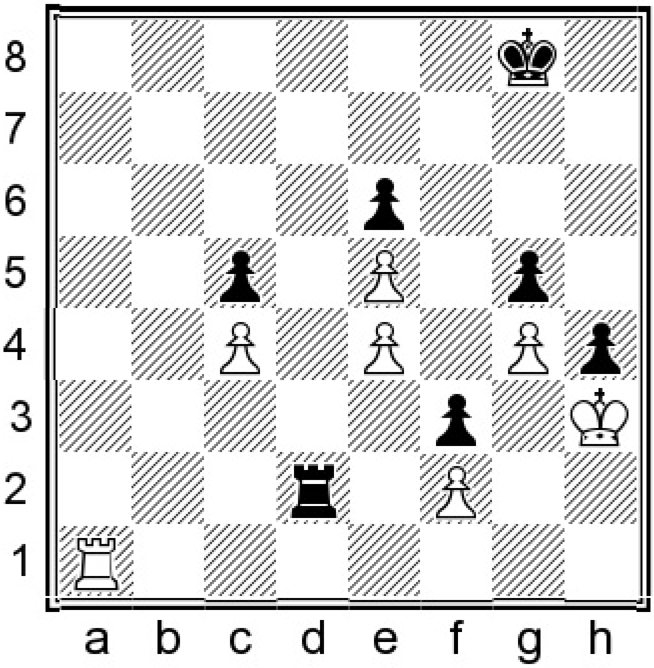
36...♖d2 37.♔h3?!

37.g5 ♖xf2+ 38.♔h3 ♔h7 39.♔xh4 ♖g2 40.♖f1 ♔g6 41.♖xf3 ♖xg5 gave White more practical chances, but no more than that, as his king is poorly placed. Black will take on e5 and the remaining white pawns are weak.

37...g5

Now it is easier, although White has one last hope.

38.e4



Exercise: How did Carlsen finish off the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

38...♖d4!

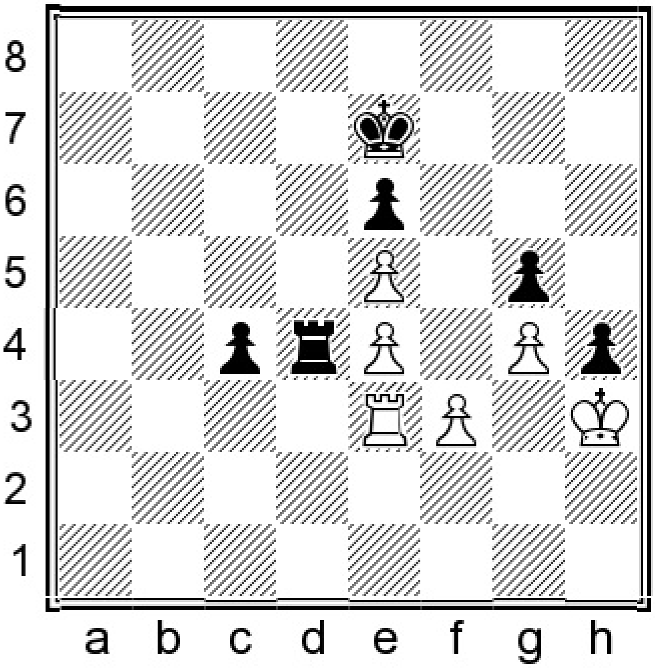
White pinned his last hopes on a stalemate trick, but of course Carlsen avoided it.

38...♖xf2? 39.♖a8+ ♔f7 40.♖a7+ ♔e8 41.♖a8+ ♔d7 42.♖a7+ ♔c6 43.♖a6+ ♔b7 44.♖a7+! was the trap.

39.♖a8+ ♔f7 40.♖a3

Carlsen mentioned 40.♖a7+ but came to the conclusion that Black is winning anyway. One way is 40...♔g6 41.♖e7 ♖d1! 42.♖xe6+ ♔g7 43.♔h2 ♖f1 44.♖f6 ♖xf2+ 45.♔h3 ♖f1 46.♔h2 f2 47.♔g2 ♖g1+ 48.♔xf2 ♖xg4, planning 49...h3 with a winning rook ending again.

40...♖xc4 41.♖xf3+ ♔e7 42.♖e3 ♖d4 43.f3 c4



Black has no material advantage, but has two passed pawn, and White, with his king paralysed, is helpless.

44.♖a3

If 44.♖c3 then 44...♔d7, bringing the king to the queenside, is easily winning; 44...♖d3 45.♖xc4 ♖xf3+ is also effective.

The rest is easy. After giving up his c-pawn, Black can collect several of the weak white pawns.

44...♖d3 45.♖a7+ ♔d8 46.♔g2 c3 47.♖a4 c2 48.♖c4 ♖d2+ 49.♔h3 ♔d7 50.♖c5

Or 50.♖c3 ♖f2.

50...♖f2 51.f4 ♖f3+ 52.♔h2 ♖xf4

0–1

Carlsen went for the Stonewall Dutch again, and for some reason it seems that Caruana didn’t expect it.

Caruana reacted well and found a novelty on move 13, but it took him too much time. That move was praised by Carlsen; he reacted with an unusual exchange of his good bishop and got a balanced position.

The game reached a drawish ending, and both players believed that it would finish in a draw, but Caruana had problems with his clock. Carlsen continued pressing.

This is the synopsis Caruana gave: “I was thinking the position was a draw no matter what I do. Somehow, I just drifted. Probably every move I made was a mistake. I started to see ghosts. It’s a bit hard to explain why I was so worried in this endgame. It’s a fairly elementary draw.”

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Remember what Dvoretsky described as the “superfluous knight”. (*11...♘bd7?*).

2.) It is always useful to ask oneself “Which piece should I exchange?” and “which piece should I keep?”. (13...♗xe5! 26.♖xe8+? 31.♗e2?).

3.) Even in drawn endings, continue pressing! (27...♖d8! 30...♘d2!).

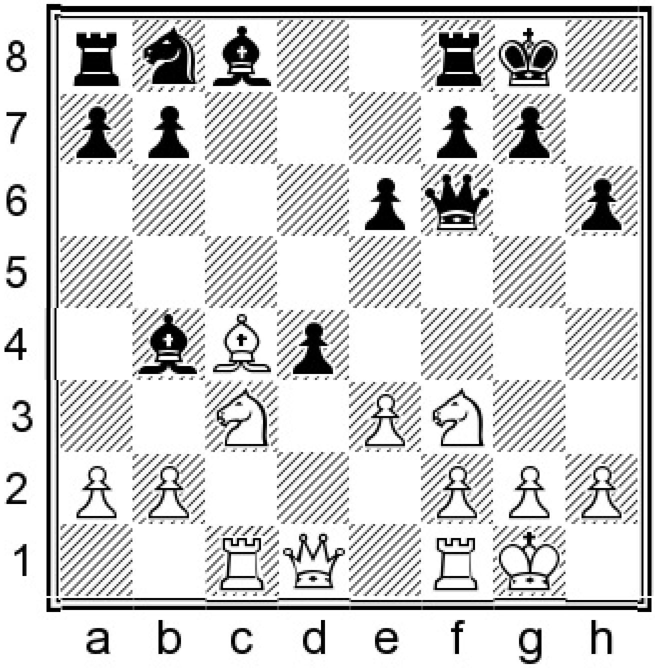
4.) Always ask yourself “What is my opponent planning?” or “what defence does he have?” (13...♗xe5! 33...h5! *38...♖xf2?*).

5.) Avoid time trouble! White lost a drawn ending because of that. The pressure exerted by Carlsen wouldn’t be enough to win if White had retained enough time to think.

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 14
Shakhriyar Mamedyarov – Magnus Carlsen
Queen’s Gambit [D38]
Qatar Masters, Doha (8), 28.12.2015

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 d5 4.♘c3 ♗b4 5.♗g5 h6 6.♗xf6 ♕xf6 7.e3 0-0 8.♖c1 dxc4 9.♗xc4 c5 10.0-0 cxd4



This is a fashionable line. White is ahead in development and Black has the two bishops. Now White has to decide if he will play with an isolated d-pawn or retake with a piece on d4.

11.♘e4

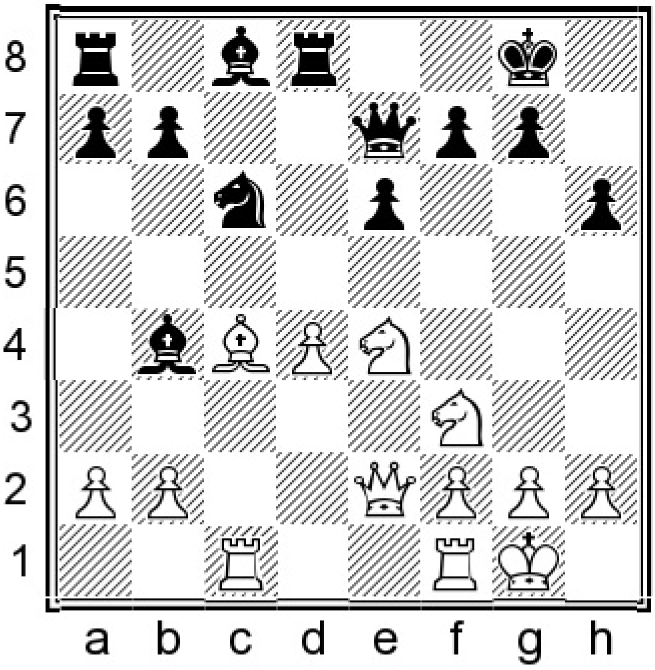
The immediate 11.exd4 is also popular. It has been played by Mamedyarov himself; with this knight jump, White delays his decision.

11...♕e7 12.exd4

Carlsen didn’t expect this particular line: “I was cursing myself” for not taking a look before the game, but he wasn’t overly worried, as he knew that the variation was not that dangerous anyway.

The alternatives were 12.♘xd4, keeping the pawn structure intact without taking any risks, and 12.a3 ♗a5 13.♕xd4. The latter line was what the official commentator of the tournament, Peter Svidler, was expecting, but he thought this quiet line wasn’t really in Mamedyarov’s style.

12...♖d8 13.♕e2 ♘c6



14.♖fd1

Carlsen didn’t remember the line very well, but in the commentary after the game he said that placing the rooks on e1 and d1 would probably have been a better arrangement.

Exercise: Black has several options, what did Carlsen choose here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14...♗a5!

The bishop heads to b6 to pressurize the d-pawn. The principal alternative was 14...♗d7. Mamedyarov – Wang, Moscow 2010, continued 15.♗d3 ♗e8 16.♗b1 ♗a5 17.♘c5 ♗b6 18.a3 ♗xc5 19.♕c2 f5 20.♕xc5 ♕xc5 21.♖xc5 ♖d6 and White ultimately won, but not as a consequence of the opening.

15.♘g3?

Played after thinking for a long time. “White is already quite committed,” said Carlsen after the game, referring to the isolani. “But what else he can do?” asked Svidler, and Carlsen honestly said “I don’t know.” In the course of the game White failed to find a way to gain an advantage, or at least to try to gain it with reasonable chances of success.

“If he gets a3–b4 and ♘c5 it would be nice, but I think he is not in time for that,” said Carlsen.

The known paths don’t help us either. After 15.♘c3 in Vachier-Lagrave – Hou Yifan, Biel 2014, Black continued with her development via 15...♗d7 16.♗d3 ♗e8 17.♕e4, and now she defended her kingside with a typical manoeuvre in this position, 17...f5 18.♕e3 ♗h5 with good play.

Heading to the queenside with 15.♗b5 ♗d7 16.♘c5 ♗e8 doesn’t cause Black problems either. Austrian GM Ruck played this line with success, but White is no better, e.g. 17.d5 ♖xd5 18.♖xd5 exd5 19.♕xe7 ♘xe7 20.♘xb7, with equality.

So it already seems that White’s opening choice was unfortunate.

15...♗b6 16.♕e4 ♗d7

The d4-pawn is vulnerable. This is usual; the difference with standard positions of this structure is that White cannot drum up enough activity to compensate for it.

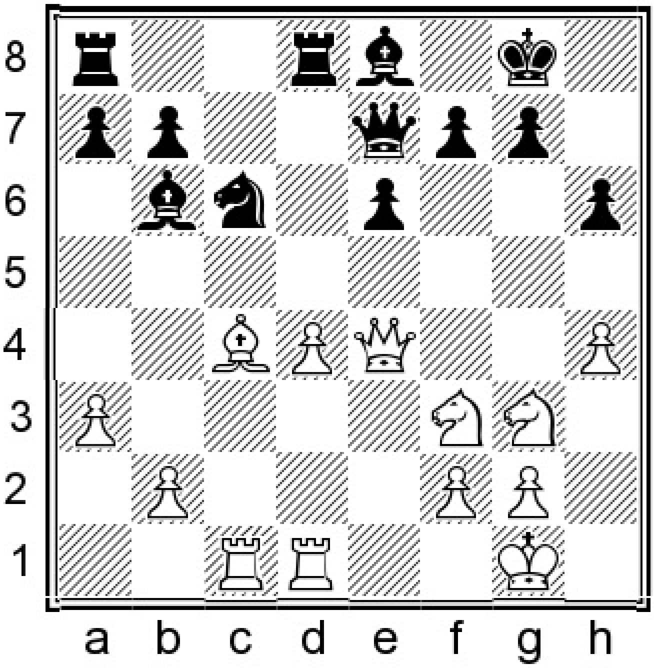
17.h4

Mamedyarov tries to create some attacking chances against the kingside, but as Svidler pointed out, Black’s position is easier to play. He can defend himself in a natural and solid way.

“After 17.♗d3 both 17...f5 and 17...g6 are playable,” said Carlsen. After 17...f5 18.♕e3 ♗e8 19.♗c4 ♗f7, maybe White had to play 20.♗b5, “but it seems that he is just trying to equalize,” he concluded.

Perhaps that is right. White’s only hope is to simplify and reach a drawish endgame, but here, with Black having the two bishops, the normal way to equalize, playing d5, doesn’t guarantee an easy draw.

17...♗e8 18.a3



“Now ♗a2 and ♗b1 is coming, but it is not very frightening.” (Carlsen).

Mamedyarov said to Carlsen after the game that he missed Black’s next move.

Exercise: Which move was that?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18...♖d6!

The pressure against the d4-pawn is growing. Black has a clear target, whereas White does not have real prospects of successful activity on the kingside.

19.♕g4?

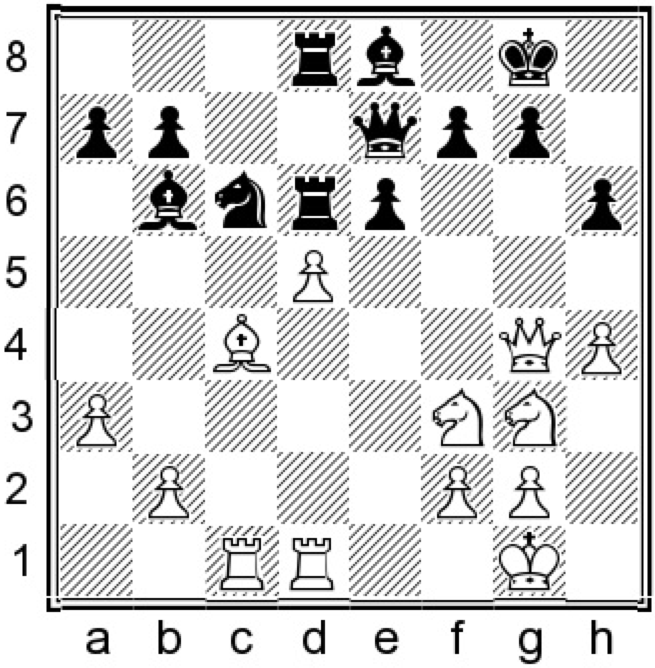
Still trying to attack, but he doesn’t have enough pieces.

“He really needs to go 19.d5 here, it’s pretty miserable, but...” said Carlsen. “You take and go ...♖ad8,” said Svidler. Carlsen accepted that, agreeing “Black is better for sure.”

The game could continue 19...exd5 20.♖xd5 ♕xe4 21.♘xe4 ♖xd5 22.♗xd5 ♖d8, which may not be much worse, but it is very sad for White. He must try to stop the advance of his opponent, who has the two bishops, for a considerable amount of time.

So White has no safety net either.

19...♖ad8 20.d5



Carlsen said that 20.♘e4 ♖6d7 “doesn’t go anywhere,” and then he added, “20...♖xd4 21.♘xd4 ♘xd4 is also good for Black.”

Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

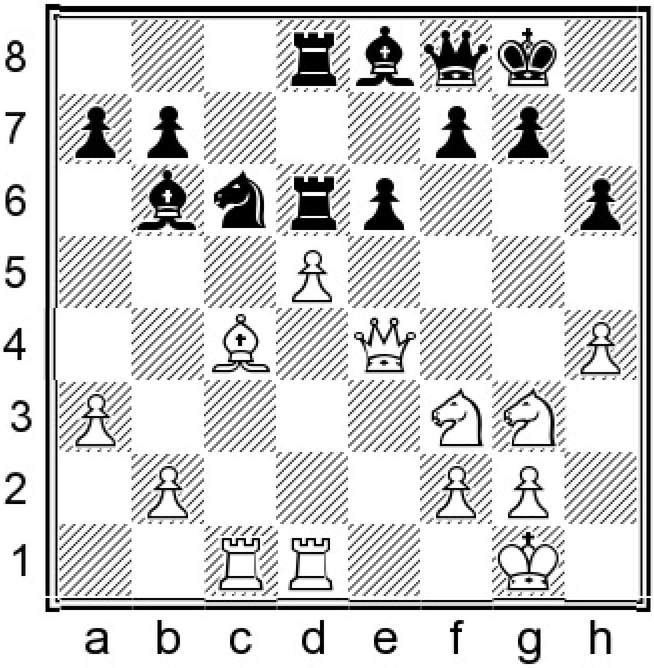
20...♕f8!

Black exploits the pin on the d-file with this powerful retreat. The queen counters the potential ♘f5 by overprotecting g7 and preparing ...♘e7. White’s position is critical.

“I didn’t see any good for White,” said Carlsen. Svidler agreed.

21.♕e4

Carlsen mentioned the line 21.♗a2 exd5 (21...♘e7 is also good) 22.♘f5 ♗d7! 23.♖xd5 ♖xd5 24.♗xd5 ♗xf5 25.♕xf5 ♘e7 and Black wins.



Exercise (easy): What did Carlsen play here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

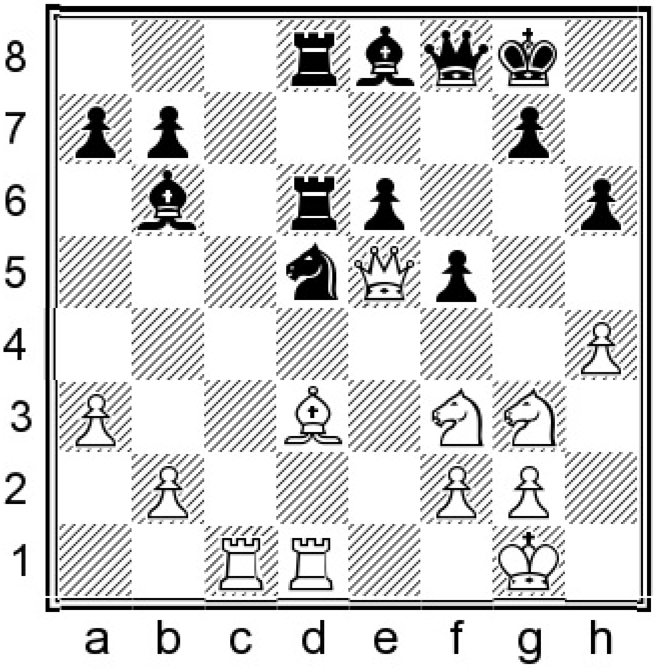
21...♘e7!

Natural and strong. Now Black will have “a healthy extra pawn, and probably more than that,” said Carlsen.

22.♗d3 f5!

Again, the strongest defence.

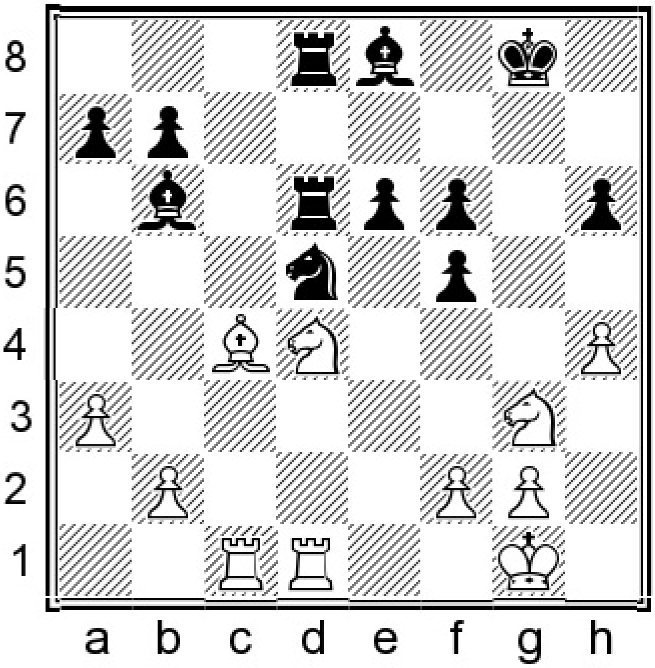
23.♕e5 ♘xd5



24.♗xf5?

A wrong combination, but White’s position is already bad.

At the press conference, Carlsen and Svidler looked at 24.♗c4, which is also the computer’s choice today, “but then 24...♕f6,” said Svidler, which is one of the good answers according to the engines. After 25.♕xf6 gxf6 26.♘d4 Carlsen proposed 26...♗xd4 27.♖xd4 ♗c6, which is of course very good for Black. He is a pawn up and has a much better ending.

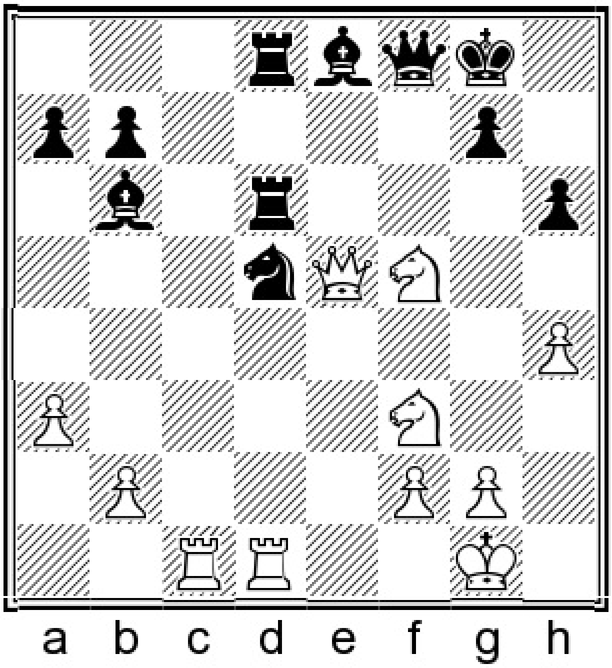


Exercise: Can you improve in the line mentioned by the world champion? What would you play instead of 26...♗xd4?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: There are good alternatives exploiting the pin on the d-file, such as 26...♘f4! or 26...♘c7!, attacking the d4-knight and winning, but 26...♘e7! is even more accurate, defending f5. After 27.♗xe6+ ♔f8 Black wins a piece.

24...exf5 25.♘xf5



Exercise: The combination can be refuted in more than one way. Carlsen chose the strongest. What did he play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

25...♖c6!

Obviously not 25...♖6d7? due to 26.♖xd5. 25...♗c6 was also possible, but the move played keeps the extra piece after 26.♖xc6 bxc6 or 26.♖b1 ♔h8 (among other options) 27.♖xd5 ♖xd5 28.♕xd5 ♖c5.

0–1

Both players had 5.5 points out of 7 before this penultimate round. Carlsen said that Shakhriyar was not the worst opponent in that situation, meaning he always plays very sharply and doesn't go for a forced draw.

Magnus got a quick win in this crucial game. They played a typical isolated d-pawn structure. White wanted to attack and he tried to create quick threats against the rather undefended king, but his activity was stopped with precise defence and Black gained an advantage. White tried to complicate the game by sacrificing a piece, but Carlsen refuted it.

It is remarkable how quickly and easily Carlsen outplayed such a strong player as Mamedyarov with the black pieces in this game. A draw in the last game with Kramnik lead to a tie-break with Yu Yangyi. Carlsen won 2-0 and took first place in the tournament.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) It is important to know typical structures such as isolated d-pawn, hanging pawns, etc., because they can arrive from different openings.

2.) Be objective. It is nice to play what we like, but it is necessary to evaluate whether it is the best the position offers. (*12.♘xd4, 12.a3 ♗a5 13.♕xd4*).

3.) Be objective. A player with the isolated d-pawn generally gets active play and chances to initiate an attack, but not always. (15.♘g3? 19.♕g4?).

4.) It is important to know the typical plans of the structure you play. (14...♗a5! 17...♗e8! *17...f5!*).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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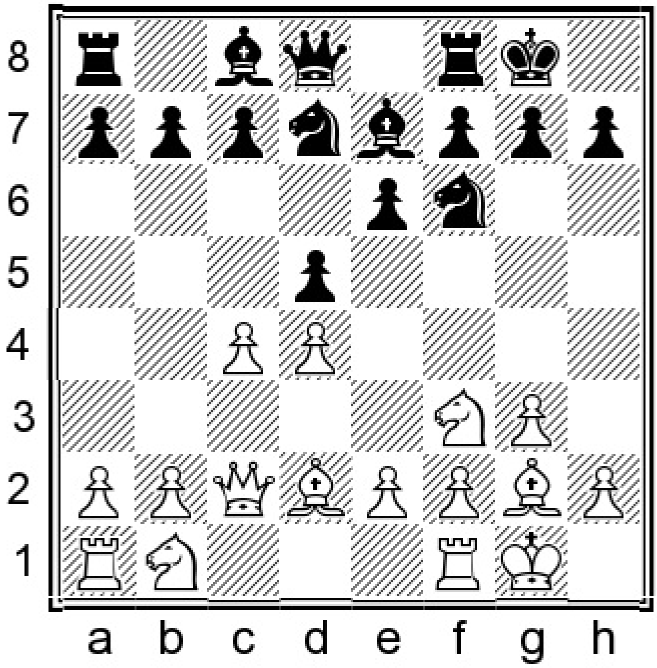
Game 15

Pavel Eljanov – Magnus Carlsen

Catalan Opening [E08]

Tata Steel Wijk aan Zee (7), 23.01.2016

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 d5 4.g3 ♗b4+ 5.♗d2 ♗e7 6.♗g2 0-0 7.0-0 ♘bd7 8.♕c2



Exercise: Black has several options in this popular variation. Carlsen played the most consistent move in his opinion. Can you guess what Carlsen played?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

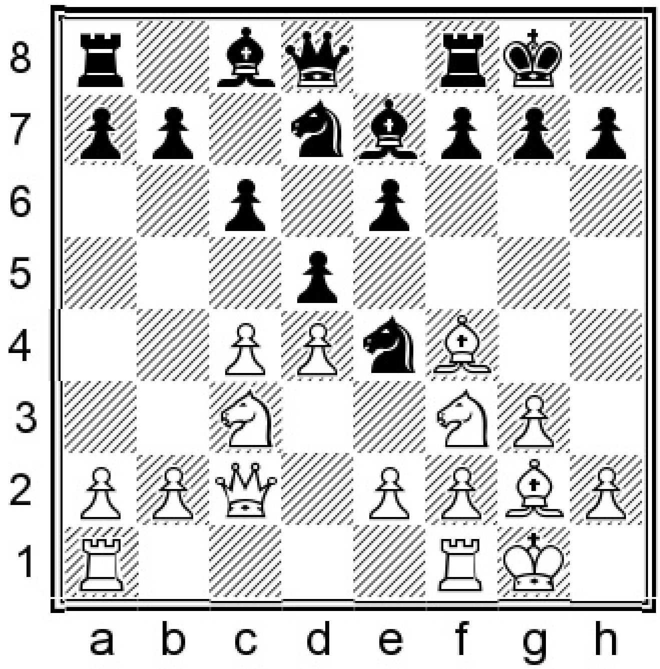
8...♘e4

Question: Well, I am not very impressed, why is this so special or consistent?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because Black plans to play ...f5. It is consistent with what Carlsen said in the video series for chess24.com: playing this move order, Black gets “the best version of the Stonewall.”

9.♗f4 c6 10.♘c3



10...g5

Question: What a move! This is dangerous, isn’t it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Well, if Black wants to play ...f5 then it’s not so strange. Black will advance on the kingside anyway, so it makes sense to chase the bishop away from its active position, gaining time.

It was even played in a World Championship match.

The immediate 10...f5 is also possible.

11.♗e3

In one of the many tournaments online played during the 2020 pandemic, Eljanov faced this move again, against Quesada, in chess.com INT 2020. He preferred 11.♗c1, and after 11...f5 his idea was to give his bishop a different role by playing 12.b3. This is not new, it just followed the World Championship game mentioned above, which was Petrosian – Botvinnik, Moscow, m/9 1963.

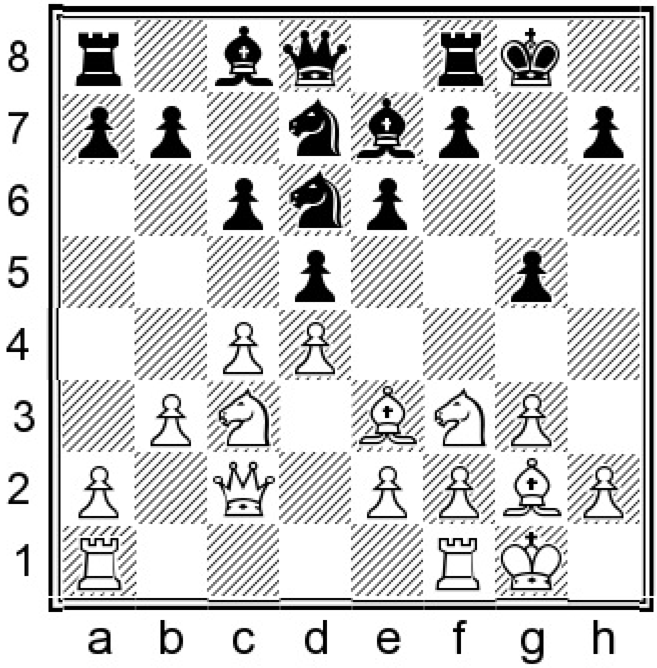
11...♘d6

The world champion plays a novelty. Previously, the straightforward 11...f5 was almost the only move chosen, even by an ex-world champion: Bernard – Spassky, Angers 1990, continued 12.♖ad1 ♘d6 13.c5 ♘f7 14.b4 a6 15.a3 ♗f6 16.a4 ♗g7 17.♘d2 e5!, and Black is fine.

Eljanov had played the position after 11...f5 too, by a transposition of moves (it began with a Dutch Defence) in Eljanov – Rapport, Biel 2015. The game continued 12.♖ad1 ♘d6 13.b3 (this is more flexible than 13.c5) 13...♗f6?! (13...b6 seems better, while 13...dxc4?! 14.♗c1! gives White enormous compensation for the pawn) 14.♗c1 ♖f7 15.♗a3, and White was better.

12.b3

A standard sacrifice as we have seen. After 12.cxd5 Black would answer 12...exd5, reaching a kind of Carlsbad structure where the knight on d6 is usually well placed as it controls both c4 (to counter any minority attack) and e4.



Exercise: How did Carlsen respond to Eljanov's pawn sacrifice?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12...♘f5

12...f5 would be the alternative, but this is the point of the novelty, to use f5 for the knight, and since the pawn on d4 is hanging, White must sacrifice a pawn or let Black eliminate the good e3-bishop.

Instead, as we saw in a similar position, 12...dxc4 13.♗c1!, clearing the advance of the e-pawn, would deliver good compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

13.g4?!

This move was unexpected for Peter Svidler, who was commentating online for chess24.com. White not only accepts, but forces, the exchange on e3.

Question: A rather questionable decision, why not make a more useful move like 13.♖ad1 instead?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: That's a logical idea, but Black would be fine playing 13...g4 14.♘e1 ♘xe3 15.fxe3 f5 followed by ...♗g5.

Black has nothing to fear from 13.♕d3 either, where White wants to maintain his structure. Black can continue 13...g4, followed by 14...♘xe3 and 15...♗g5.

Question: Well, what is left then? So Black's idea holds?

Show/Hide Solution

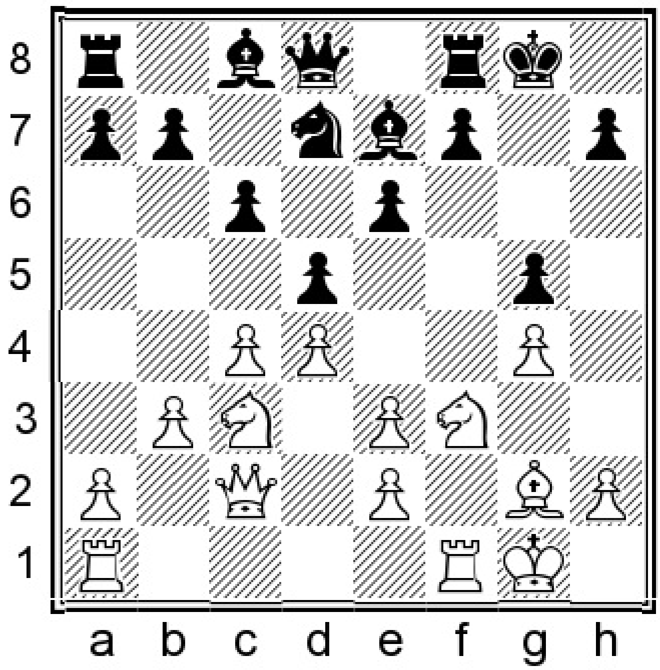
Answer: At the board, with limited time to think and seeing the position for the first time, it is not easy to grasp the whole picture.

A third option is to sacrifice the d-pawn, trying to take advantage of the weaknesses created by ...g5-g4.

13.♗c1 g4 14.♘e1 ♘xd4 15.♕d1 ♗f6 16.♗b2 is one way, although Black seems to be fine after 16...dxc4 17.e3 ♘b5.

Grischuk played a more challenging move, 13.♗d2. Now the c3-knight is defended. After 13...g4 14.♘e1 ♘xd4 15.♕d1 White threatens both 16.e3 and 16.♗h6. After 15...♗f6 16.e3 ♘f3+ 17.♘xf3 gxf3 18.♕xf3 White was somewhat better in Grischuk – Nakamura, Paris 2019.

13...♘xe3 14.fxe3



After avoiding ...g4 White plans the e4 break.

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14...b5!

Not just defending, but sacrificing a pawn to fight for the initiative. This is the first choice of the engines (in July 2020).

15.e4

Eljanov raises the tension, continuing with his idea. After 15.cxb5 cxb5 16.♘xb5 ♗a6 17.a4 ♖c8 followed by ...♕b6, Black has enough compensation for the pawn.

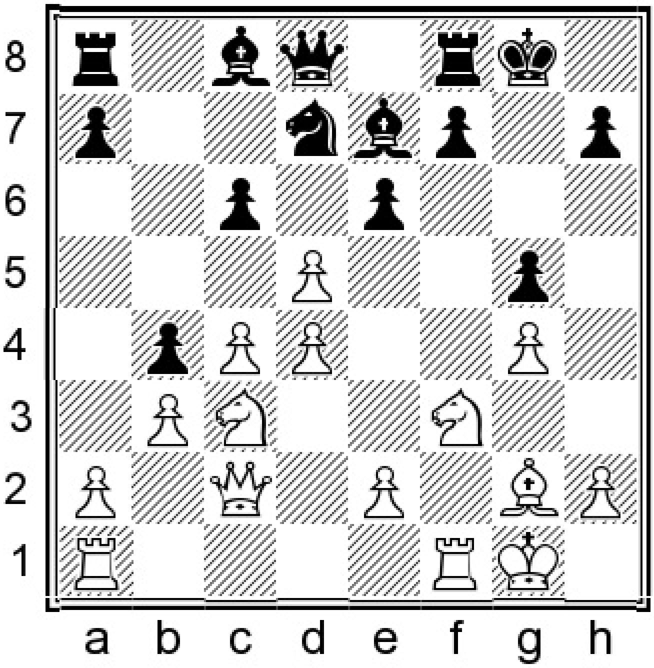
15...b4

The engines prefer to take the pawn. After 15...bxc4 16.bxc4 dxc4 17.e5 they play 17...♖b8, preparing the liberating move ...c5, but Carlsen wanted more than to be a doubled pawn up.

16.exd5

Raising the tension even more! Both players had fought for the initiative sacrificing pawns until now, but here Eljanov goes further and sacrifices a piece.

Black has no major problems after the quiet 16.♘a4. The game could continue 16...dxc4 17.bxc4 (or 17.♕xc4 ♗b7 18.♖ac1 ♘b6) 17...c5 18.d5 exd5 19.exd5 ♗d6, and Black is at least fine in both cases.



Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16...bxc3!

Accepting the sacrifice. Now the game was a mess, where nobody could be sure of what was going on, as Carlsen himself admitted.

Taking the piece was not an easy decision, because Black has good alternatives, including 16...cxd5 with a sound position. However, Carlsen trusted in his opportunities and considered that the complications shouldn't turn bad for him.

17.dxc6

Exercise: Which is the best retreat for the knight?

Show/Hide Solution

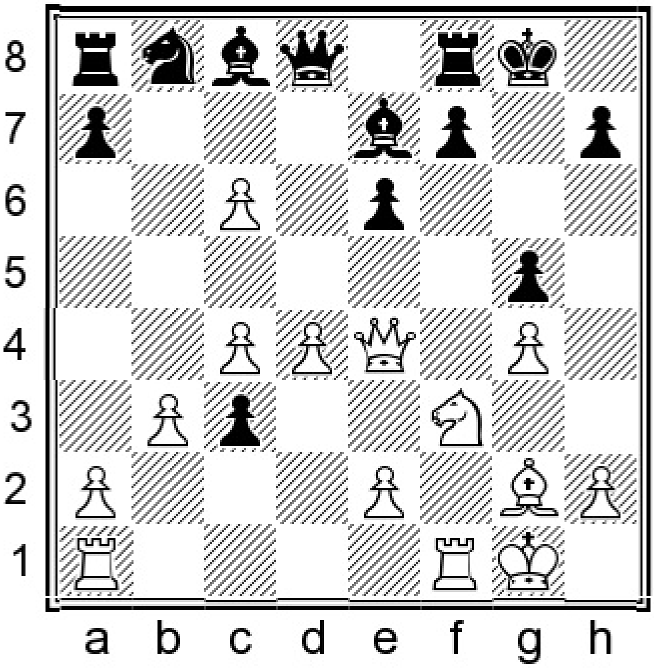
Answer:

17...♘b8!

This “undeveloping” move is clearly the best. It threatens to take the strong c6-pawn, whereas 17....♘f6? allows White to consolidate his centre playing e.g. 18.h3! ♖b8 19.♖ad1 (threatening 20.♘xg5) followed by ♘e5, with strong pressure.

18.♕e4

This is the only way to defend the c-pawn, as the d4-pawn is under attack. In case of 18.♖ad1 ♘xc6 19.♘xg5 ♗xg5 20.♗xc6, simply 20...♖b8 is better for Black. White has three pawns for the bishop after 21.♕xc3 ♕c7 22.♗g2, but 22...a5 stops his advances and normally, in such situations, the bishop is stronger (23.e4? runs into 23...e5!).



Eljanov has two pawns and a powerful pawn centre for the piece, plus he now threatens 19.c7.

Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

18...f5!

Black allows the creation of two connected passed pawns, but he thinks they will not be too dangerous. This active resource was much better than the passive defence 18...♘a6?. White would reply 19.♘e5, where 19...♘c7? is bad due to 20.♘xf7! and Black is in trouble. He should hence play 19...f5 or 19...♕e8 with an unclear position.

19.gxf5 exf5 20.♕d5+

White is forced to trade queens or Black will safely play 20...♘xc6.

20...♕xd5 21.cxd5 ♘a6

And White’s pawn mass is under control. Black can first blockade them and later attack them, so Black is better.

22.♖ac1

After 22.♘e5 Black continues 22...♘c7 23.♘c4 ♖d8, and the d5-pawn is lost. If 24.e4 fxe4 25.♗xe4 ♘xd5 26.c7, Black simply returns part of his material advantage with 26...♘xc7 27.♗xa8 ♘xa8 and a won ending.

22...♘c7 23.♘e5 f4

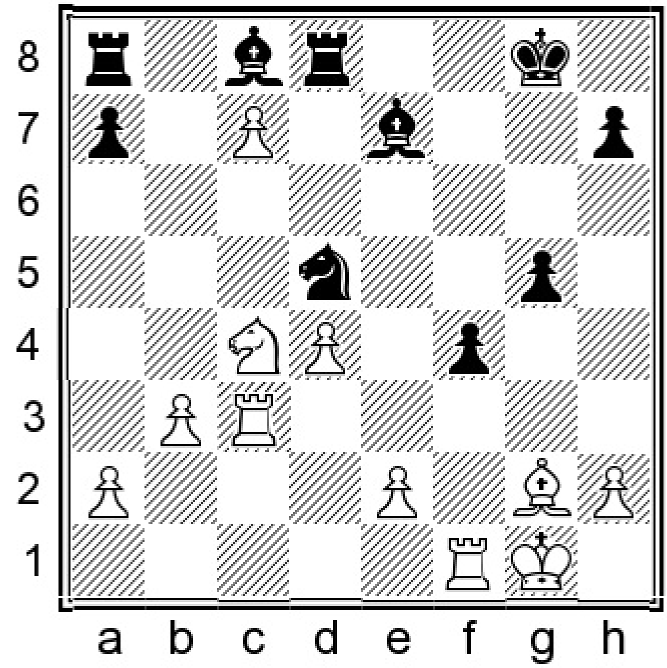
Black could try to defend his c3-pawn with 23...♘b5 or try to take the d5-pawn with 23...♖d8 and ...♖xd5 if necessary, but as the white centre is not going anywhere, he prefers to advance his kingside first.

24.♘c4

Threatening 25.d6. After 24.♖xc3 Black would not play the immediate 24...♖d8? due to 25.e4!. He should instead play 24...g4 and if 25.♘c4 (25.e4 now is bad due to 25...f3) then he could reply 25...♘b5 26.♖d3 ♗a6, followed by e.g. ...♖ad8 and ...♘c7 again, when White has no dangerous threats.

24...♖d8 25.♖xc3 ♘xd5

The alternative was 25...♖xd5. In any case, the most dangerous pawn is gone and White must do something soon.



26.c7

Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

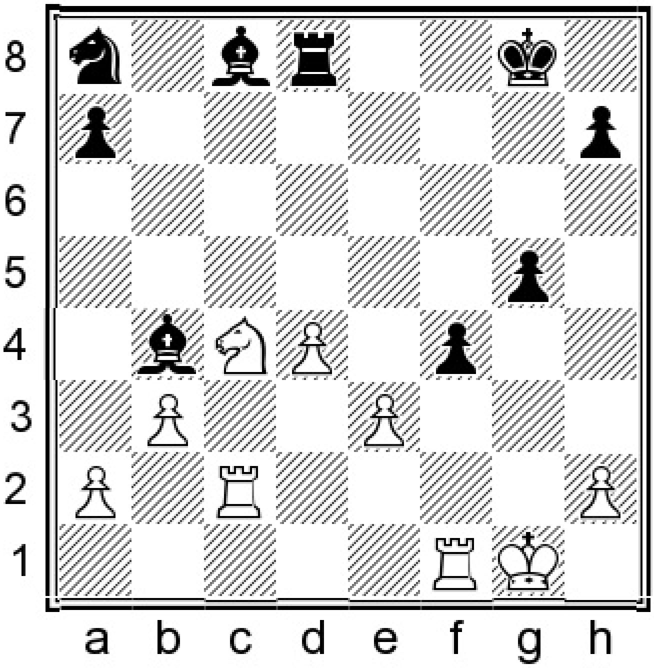
Answer:

26...♘xc7!

The best move. Black gives some material back. The situation is clarified and Black’s advantage becomes clear.

Not 26...♖d7? 27.♖cc1 ♗b7 28.♘e5, followed by ♖c5 and White is suddenly better.

27.♗xa8 ♘xa8 28.e3 ♗b4 29.♖c2



Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

29...♗b7!

The best place for the bishop. The long diagonal belongs to it, and it not only stops White's pawns, but also presses the white king if the position is opened. Besides, it supports the advance of the f-pawn.

A rook and a pawn are normally as good as two minor pieces in the endgame, but these bishops are too strong, combined with their kingside majority.

30.h4

White tries to get rid of as many pawns as possible. 30.exf4 ♖xd4 leaves him with no hope, but the chosen move doesn't either.

30...♗e4!

As we see after each move, the two bishops are extremely strong and help to win the game easily.

31.♖h2

31.♖cf2 ♘b6 32.exf4 ♘xc4 33.bxc4 gxh4 was similar.

31...♘b6!

After Black activates his last piece White's position falls apart.

32.♘e5

32.♘xb6 axb6 33.exf4 g4! and 32.hxg5 ♘xc4 33.bxc4 fxe3 were no better.

32...fxe3 33.hxg5 ♖xd4 34.♘g4 ♘d5

0–1

Carlsen introduced an interesting novelty in the opening and played actively throughout the game. Eljanov played bravely, sacrificing a piece with unclear consequences.

Carlsen said he had seen the piece sac as an option for his opponent, and that accepting it wasn't the only way to play. "I thought 'let's go for it.'...I wasn't so certain that it was winning...but certainly with the two bishops I couldn't be worse by any means and then I just took over after move 30."

Eljanov's reaction was very polite, he tweeted: "I lost but it was a good game today. One you can learn from, as I overestimated my position almost all the time."

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) A new idea in the opening may not be particularly strong, but its impact in practical play may be greater. (11...♘d6! 12...♘f5!).

2.) Tactics are always important. To sacrifice a piece or accept a sacrifice may be a question of courage, but good analysis is essential. (16...bxc3! 17...♘b8! 18...f5!).

3.) It is important to figure out when the best moment is to return part of extra material. (*25...♖xd5*! 26...♘xc7!).

4.) Two bishops are usually not much stronger than a rook and a pawn in an ending, but if they have a passed pawn to push, they can turn into a winning advantage.

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

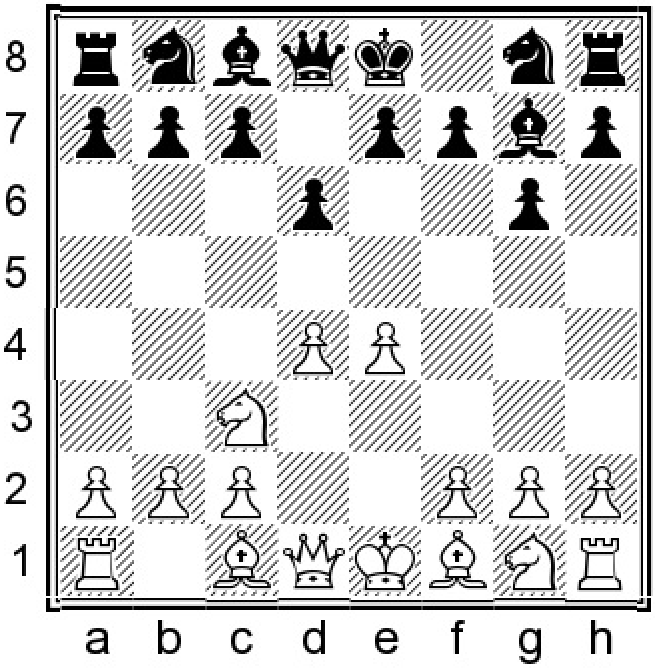
Game 16

Dragan Solak – Magnus Carlsen

Pirc Defence [B08]

Baku Olympiad (7), 09.09.2016

1.e4 d6 2.d4 g6 3.♘c3 ♗g7



Question: What a strange choice from Carlsen, why did he play it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen chose the Modern Defence to play for a win. It’s a rather risky choice, but in situations like this he probably says to himself something like: “If you want to win with Black, then some risk is unavoidable.”

4.♘f3

The biggest risk disappears after this move. White prefers to play safely rather than ambitiously, avoiding lines with, for example, 4.f4.

4...a6

Question: What about this move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Let’s change our last sentence a little, the biggest risk of quickly finding yourself in a bad position when playing the Modern/Pirc has disappeared, but when White choses one of the most solid lines, the risk of drawing still remains.

So Carlsen is playing this Modern/Pirc in an atypical way, avoiding the usual lines which give White a pleasant position.

Playing in a flexible way, he hopes to get a good version of usual Pirc positions, or at least an original position where both players have to take decisions at the board, and not just repeat standard patterns.

Black “threatens” ...b5 in the upcoming moves, giving White reason to think whether to allow or avoid it on each move.

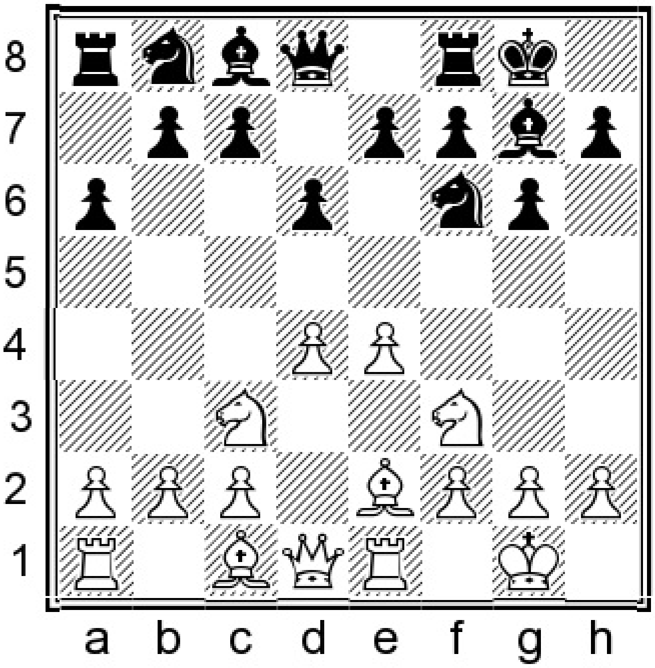
5.♗e2

White continues with a classical setup, without bothering to stop ...b5 for the moment.

5...♘f6

Carlsen finally deploys a Pirc Defence, but with the premature move ...a6.

6.0-0 0-0 7.♖e1



Evidently White is not afraid of ...b5 and tries to demonstrate that 4...a6 was a tempo loss.

7...♘c6

Black continues to play in a provocative manner.

Question: But why doesn’t he take his chances and play 7...b5? That was why he played 4...a6 after all.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: More precisely, 4...a6 was played to “threaten” ...b5 and induce White to play a4. He would then answer ...b6.

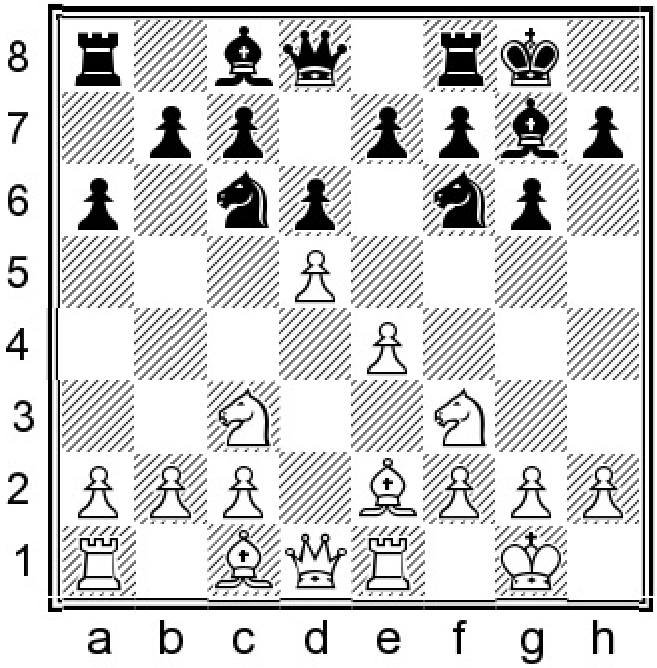
Of course, the advance ...b5 must be considered after each move, but the immediate 7...b5 is dubious, as the thematic advance 8.e5! follows. After 8...dxe5 9.dxe5 ♕xd1 10.♖xd1 followed by ♘d5, ♗f4, etc., White is clearly better.

If 8...♘fd7 then another thematic move could follow, 9.e6!. White is also better after 9...fxe6 10.♘g5 followed by ♗f3.

8.d5

White has several standard moves, such as h3 followed by ♗f1, continuing with the idea he chose playing 7.♖e1.

Now he accepts the challenge and plays a natural move instead of 8.h3 (if 8.♗f1 then 8...♗g4). In that case, Carlsen would probably play the "normal" move 8...e5.



Exercise: How did Carlsen respond?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

8...♘a7

Question: What is this?

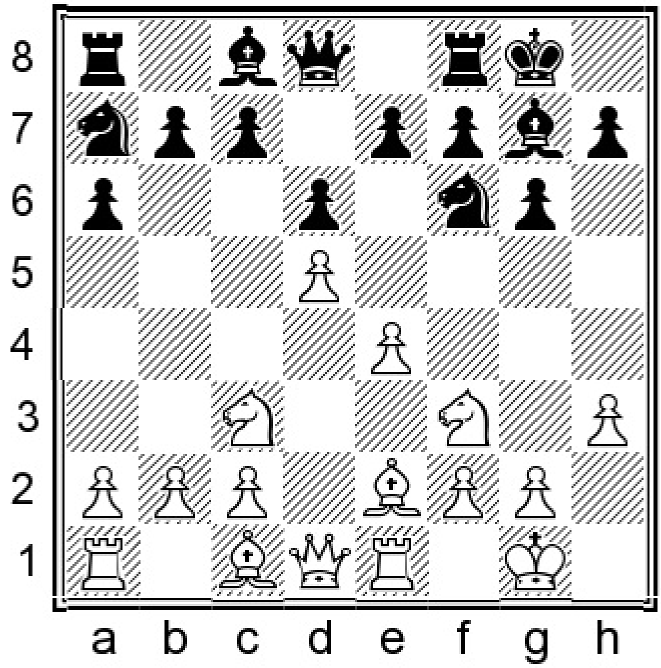
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: I know, a7 doesn't seem the ideal destination of the knight, but it is not so bad, as we will see. On a7 the knight doesn't get in the way of development as it does from b8.

Anyway, the alternatives don't seem better. After the most logical reply 8...♘e5, White would continue 9.♘xe5 and Black will have a difficult task trying to complicate the game.

The other possibility is 8...♘b8, which is a standard retreat without ...a6, but definitely not 8...♘b4?. Normally it is also a playable move, but it loses here because of 4...a6.

9.h3?!



White plays what looks like a normal and safe move, preventing 9...♗g4 and planning 10.♗f1, but Carlsen showed that it was inaccurate, at least in practical play.

Exercise: How did he reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

9...b5!

Now Black is fine and we can say that the best move was 9.a4! instead of 9.h3?!. Now White must deal with the possibility of ...b4, expelling the c3-knight to take the e4-pawn.

The move 9...c6 has been played here, but White can correct his mistake by playing 10.a4! now and Black has problems with his a7-knight. It will take some time to redeploy it.

10.♗f1 ♗b7 11.a4?!

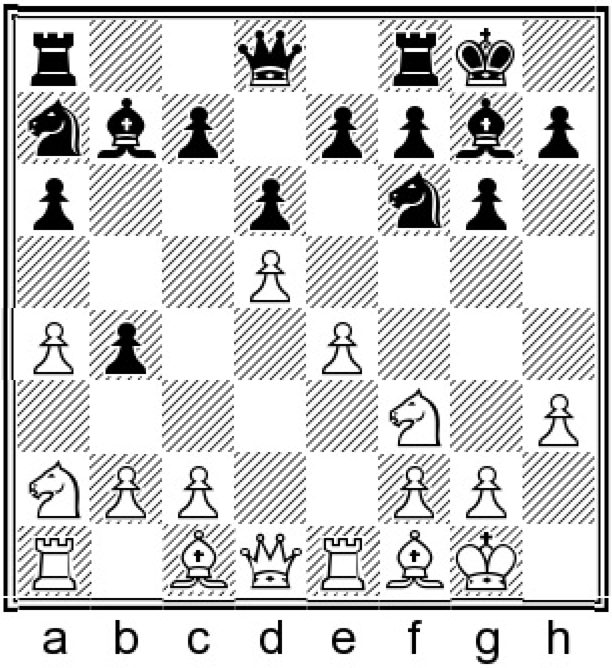
Black is ready to play 11...c6 or 11...e6, so White decides to take active measures, but the result will not be great.

It was probably better to play 11.♗g5 or 11.♗f4, planning 12.♕d2.

After 11.♗f4 c6, White probably shouldn't play 12.dxc6, as it solves Black's main (or only) problem, the location of the a7-knight. After e.g. 12...♘xc6 13.a4 b4 14.♘d5 ♘d7 Black is fine, with all his pieces in good positions.

The engines suggest the curious 12.♖b1, to have b2 defended, e.g. after 12...b4 13.dxc6 ♘xc6 14.♘d5 the move 14...♘h5 is pointless.

11...b4 12.♘a2



12...a5

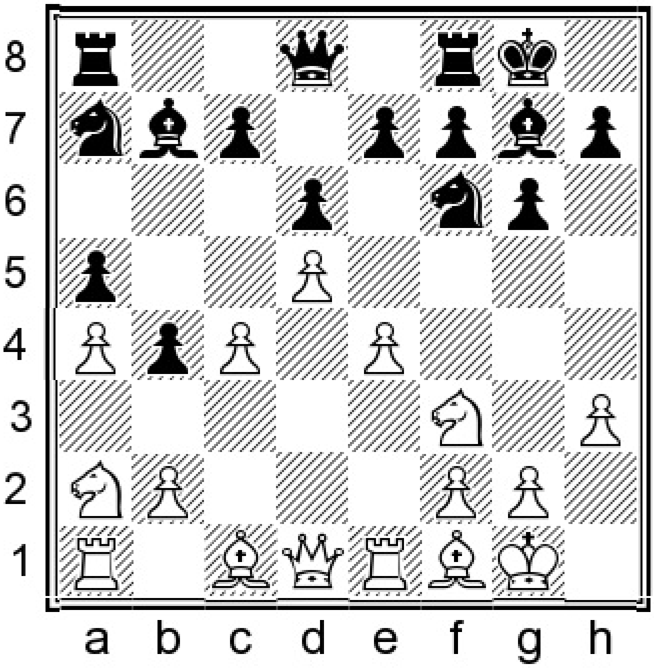
Question: Now both knights are in similar situations, on a2 and a7, and it will take time to put them on good squares. How does this affect the evaluation of the position?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: We will see soon that the knight on a2 is situated worse than its counterpart on a7. The knight on a7 has many more potential manoeuvres available, while the a2-knight will not help White reinforce his pawn structure.

13.c4

After 13.c3 c5 14.♘d2 ♘c8! 15.♘c4 ♘b6 Black has solved his main problem, and he is fine.



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

13...e6!

Beginning an attack on White’s centre.

If White is forced to take on e6 he must have a clear justification, as both the b7-bishop and the a7-knight would improve their activity.

This isn’t the case now, though, as after 14.dxe6?! fxe6 15.♘g5 ♕e7 16.e5?! the game is opened and White’s bad development is punished after 16...dxe5 17.♖xe5 ♖ad8 18.♕e1 ♘c6 19.♖xe6 ♕d7. Black has a strong initiative, 20...♘d4 is threatened, and if 20.♘f3 then 20...♘h5! 21.♗g5 ♘d4!

14.♗g5 h6 15.♗e3 ♖e8

“The threat is stronger than the execution”. Black places his rook on a file that will be opened soon, and White has to calculate 16...♘xe4 and activate his a2-knight as soon as possible.

The immediate 15...♘xe4? was wrong due to 16.♗xa7 ♗xb2 17.♖b1.

16.♗d3?

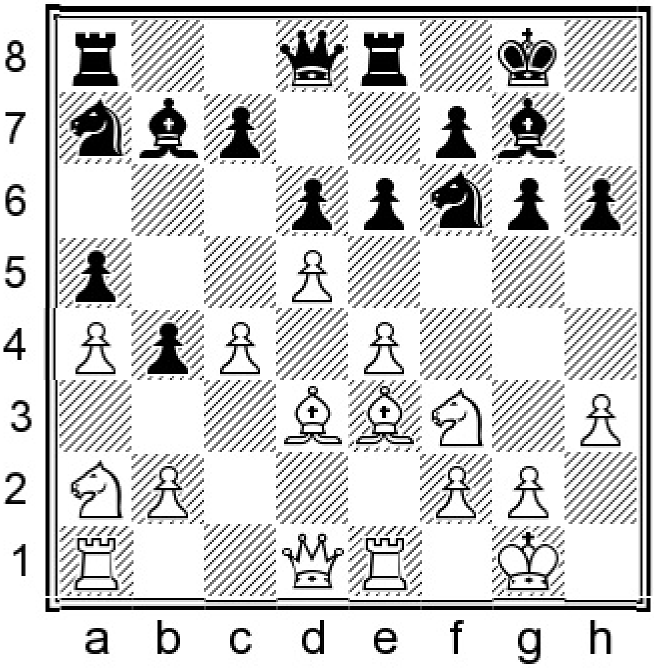
White simply defends his e4-pawn, but now his position deteriorates rapidly.

It was better to play 16.♘c1!. Black is no better after 16...exd5 17.exd5 c6 18.dxc6 ♘xc6 19.♘b3, but it was necessary to calculate the complications after 16...♘xe4 17.♗xa7 ♗xb2; here, 18.♗d4! gives both sides equal chances according to the engines.

Question: This looks very complex, how can White be sure at the board?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: That is not possible, but compared with what happens in the game it will soon be clear that this was the only way to fight, so White had to feel this was a critical moment and take time to decide what to do.



Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16...exd5!

This is the first step. Carlsen opens the e-file.

17.exd5

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

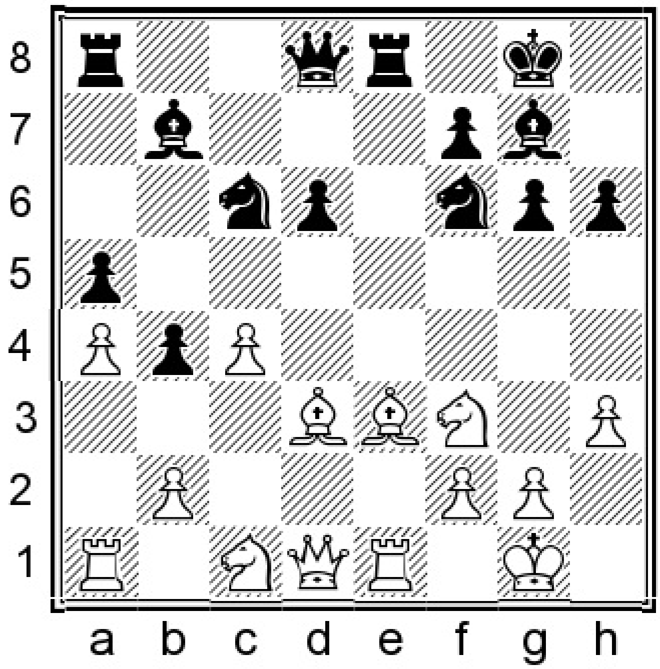
17...c6!

And now he opens the position even more. All black pieces will shortly be very active and the absence of the a2-knight from the fight will be critical in the next phase of the game.

18.dxc6 ♘xc6

The knight from a7 is back while the knight on a2 is not yet involved.

19.♘c1



The knight finally initiates its journey to the centre, but there will not be enough time to place it on a useful square.

Exercise: How did Carlsen increase his advantage?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

19...♘d7!

Now it is this knight which enters the game with tempo. Black threatens to take on b2.

20.♕c2 ♕f6

Black now activates his queen again “for free”, attacking b2.

21.♖b1

Exercise: How did Carlsen increase his advantage even more?

Show/Hide Solution

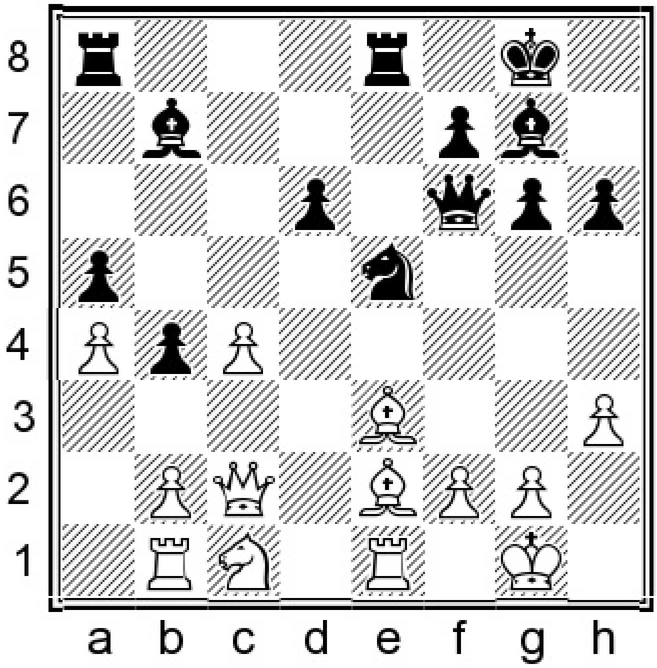
Answer:

21...♘ce5!

Now we remember Capablanca, not Lasker this time. Carlsen exchanges a superfluous piece, giving more activity to his remaining pieces.

22.♘xe5 ♘xe5 23.♗e2

White cannot defend after 23.♗e4 ♗xe4 24.♕xe4 ♖ac8!



Exercise: Black has a nearly winning advantage, and several options, what would you play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

23...d5!

Opening lines again, and his rooks will be the beneficiaries now. The strong alternative was 23...♕h4!, with the idea of playing 24...f5 or 24...♗e4.

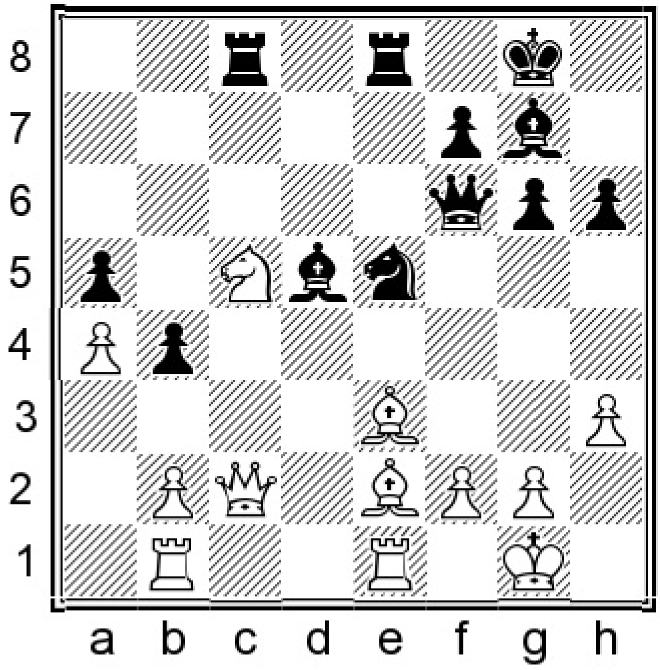
24.cxd5 ♗xd5

Black plans to harass his opponent’s queen, playing 25...♖ac8 followed by ...♖ed8. White is helpless.

25.♘b3 ♖ac8 26.♘c5

The knight finally arrives at a good square, but the result will be depressing.

Nonetheless, there was nothing clearly better. After 26.♕d1 ♖ed8 27.♘d2 ♘c4 or 27...b3 28.♖c1 ♘c4, White’s position is horrible.



Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen finish off the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26...♗f8

Just as simple as it looks. Black wins a piece.

27.♖bc1 ♗xc5 28.♗xc5 ♕g5!

Looking for the maximum. 28...♘d7 also wins. After e.g. 29.♕d2 ♖xc5 30.♖xc5 ♘xc5 31.♕xd5 Black can choose between several good moves, including 31...♕e5 or 31...♕xb2.

The text move is even stronger.

29.g3 ♘d7 30.h4 ♕d8

Now the d5-bishop is defended, so 31.♕d2 is no defence.

31.♗b5 ♖xe1+ 32.♖xe1 ♖xc5

This was a good moment to resign.

33.♕d2 h5 34.♕d4 ♕f6 35.♕e3 ♗c6 36.♕e8+ ♘f8 37.♕c8 ♖c2 38.♗xc6 ♕xf2+ 39.♔h1 ♕xe1#

0–1

Carlsen played a risky defence. This is not an uncommon approach when he has to win on demand, and his opponent didn't go for the most complex options but chose one of the safest lines.

Carlsen continued playing in an atypical way and the game soon demonstrated differences with the normal lines. Carlsen understood those differences better and his advantage began to emerge after move 15. He played better, his advantage grew, and ten moves later he got a winning position.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) "Appearances can be deceptive". A knight may not always be badly placed on a "strange" square (8...♘a7!).

2.) "Pawns don't move backwards!" You must correctly evaluate changes in the pawn structure. (9.h3? *9.a4!* 9...b5! 11.a4?).

3.) "If one piece stands badly, the whole position is bad." (The a2-knight after 11.a4?).

4.) Time is very important if you want to profit from a temporary advantage such as undeveloped pieces. You must gain more activity as soon as possible, without giving your opponent time to fix his coordination. (17...c6! 19...♘d7! 20...♕f6! 23...d5!).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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Game 17

Pavel Eljanov – Magnus Carlsen

Dutch Defence [A90]

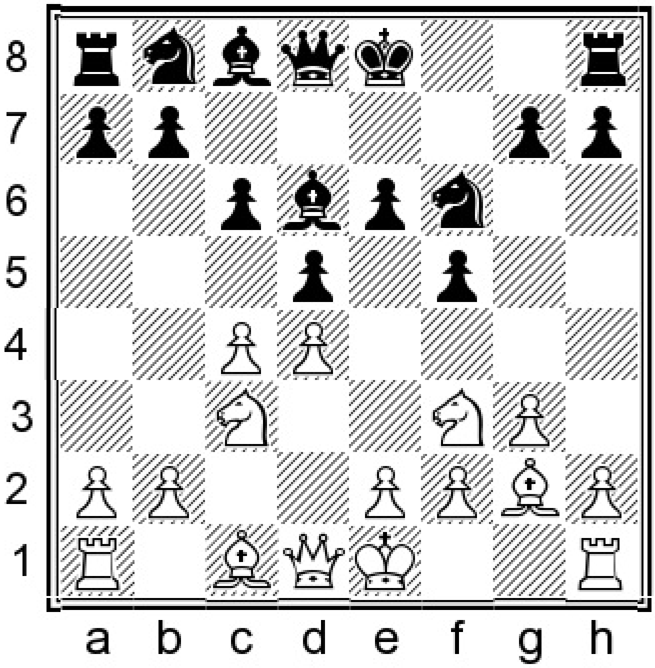
Tata Steel Wijk aan Zee (12), 28.01.2017

1.d4 e6 2.c4 f5

Carlsen played this move order with 1...e6 against people who did not have 1.e4 in their repertoire.

He was not leading the tournament at this point and he chose the Stonewall when he was in a must-win situation.

3.g3 ♘f6 4.♗g2 d5 5.♘f3 ♗d6 6.♘c3 c6



7.♗f4

Question: Is this exchange good for White?

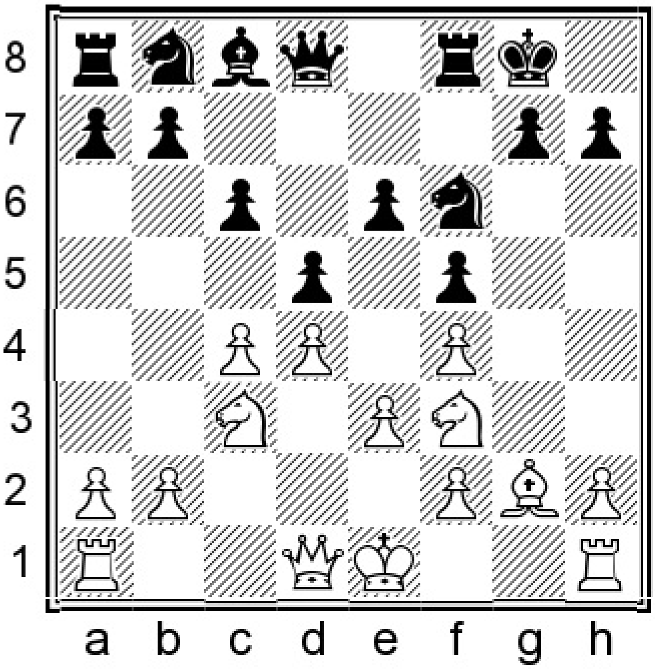
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It’s difficult to give a definitive answer.

As we know, normally the exchange of the dark-squared bishops favours White, because this bishop is the “best” of Black’s two bishops, but of course by accepting doubled pawns he is paying a price.

In some positions, Black can play for the breakthrough ...g5, but this didn’t happen in our game.

7...♗xf4 8.gxf4 0-0 9.e3



Exercise: Black has two principal ideas in this position. What do you think Carlsen chose?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

9...♗d7

This is one of the typical ways to develop the (not always) “worst” Stonewall bishop. Carlsen mentioned this typical manoeuvre in his videos; the bishop begins its journey to h5 where it will be active.

The other way to develop it is by playing 9...b6 and 10...♗b7.

The engines propose a different way, 9...dxc4 10.♘e5 ♘bd7 11.♘xc4 ♘d5. Seeing the quick deterioration of Black’s position, maybe it should be considered.

10.♕b3 ♕c7

Black avoids 10...♕b6, trying to keep the game complicated, but White is ahead in development and the consequences will be seen very soon.

11.0-0 ♗e8 12.♖fc1!

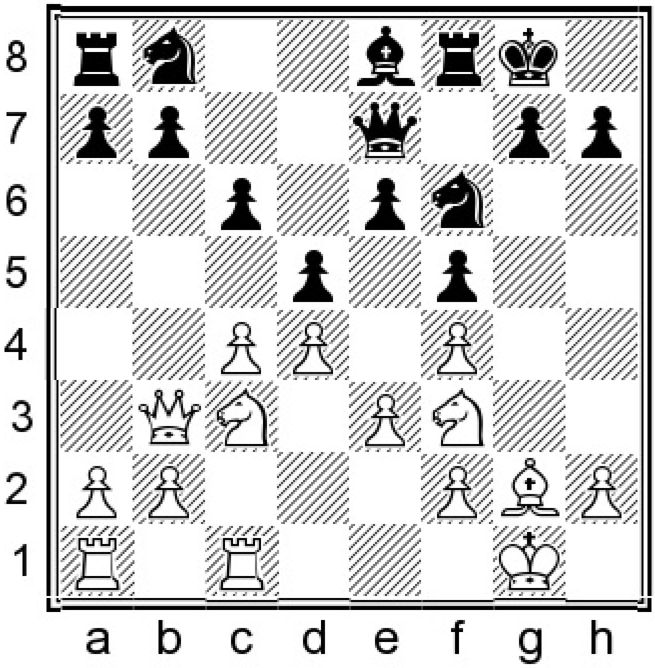
Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12...♕e7

Black has to be alert. Not yet 12...♗h5?, as it loses a pawn after 13.cxd5 exd5 14.♘xd5, but the game move marks a new tempo loss.



13.♕a3!

Question: Is it good to accept more doubled pawns?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: In this case, the benefits are greater than the disadvantages. The opened b-file will be in White's favour and the doubled pawns cannot be attacked by Black.

White's position is already generating several promising ideas. After the natural continuation 13.♘e5 ♗h5 he could play 14.♖ab1, preparing ♕a3. If 14...♘a6 (to meet 15.♕a3 with 15...♘b4, although this is not clearly good for Black after 16.cxd5), the knight ends up on a bad square: White can play the immediate 15.cxd5 exd5 16.♕c2, hitting f5, then 16...♘e4 17.b4!, with a good version of the minority attack.

13...♕xa3 14.bxa3 ♘bd7 15.♖ab1

White has a superior endgame position. Carlsen's first goal is to avoid a worsening of his position: a Laskerian defence will be needed.

15...♖b8 16.a4!

Eljanov continues to play very well. With this strong move he plans to play a5 and also stops ...b5, because Black was ready to play 16...dxc4. Now, 17.♘d2 would follow.

16...a5

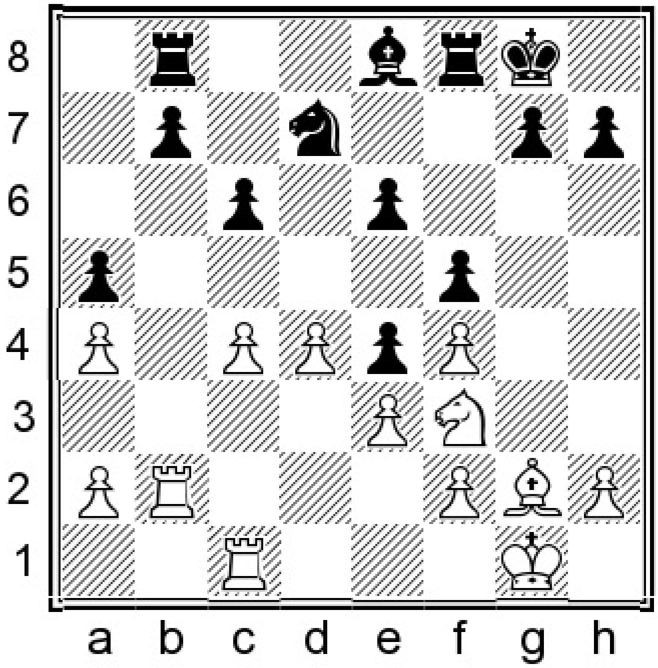
This move weakens the queenside, but allowing a5 was not pleasant. After 16...♘b6 17.c5 ♘c4 White gains more terrain playing e.g. 18.♗f1 ♘a5 19.♖b4, followed by ♖cb1, and the plan ♘d2-b3 should be considered.

17.♖b2 ♘e4

Black has to choose between unpleasant options. After 17...♗h5 White continues to improve his position with natural moves, e.g. 18.♘e5 ♖fc8 19.♖cb1 b6, and now White has 20.♗f1, improving his position, and he can also consider 20.cxd5!: if 20...exd5 then the c-pawn is weak. White would reply 21.♖c2, while if 20...cxd5 then 21.♘b5.

18.♘xe4 dxe4

An easy decision, because in case of 18...fxe4 White could play 19.♘e5, and Black will be much worse and have zero chance of winning after 19...♘xe5 20.fxe5.



19.♘g5!

Question: Is this better than 19.♘e5?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: If we are talking about objectivity, it is not so clear, both are probably good. After 19.♘e5 ♘xe5 20.fxe5 Black has the counterattack 20...c5!?, but after 21.d5 ♗xa4 White has 22.f3!, with good compensation for the pawn. Nonetheless, why sacrifice a pawn when you have another good continuation that is clearly no worse?

So, from a practical point of view 19.♘g5! is better.

19...♖f6 20.f3!

This pawn break was the idea. Now the (not always) "good" g2-bishop enters the game. The knight will be driven back for a while, but that is not relevant.

20...h6 21.♘h3 exf3 22.♗xf3 ♖f7

The rook cedes f6 to the knight and prepares to overprotect b7.

23.♘f2!

The knight heads to the strong square d3. Eljanov continues to play excellently.

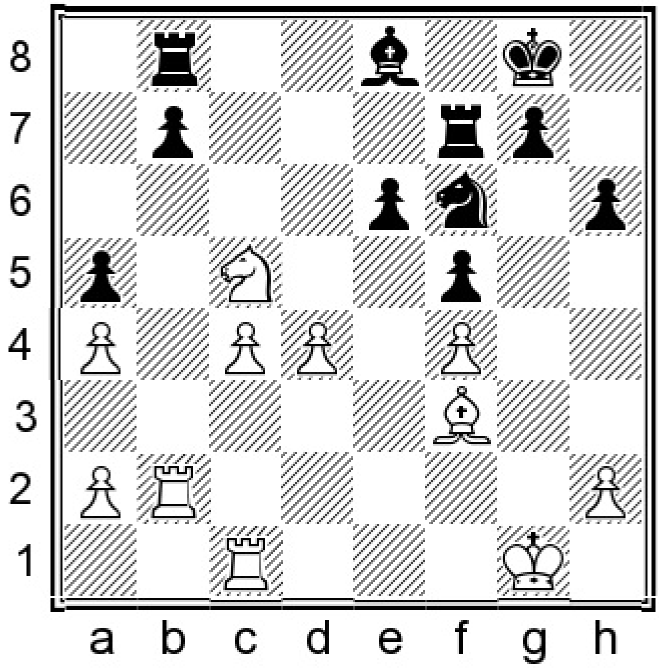
23...c5 24.♘d3

Eljanov had 30 minutes left to reach time control, while Carlsen had 39 minutes.

Eljanov could have played 24.♖xb7 with an advantage. Black will recover the pawn, but White would get a passed c-pawn. However, he wanted more.

24...cxd4 25.exd4 ♘f6 26.♘c5

White had a difficult choice, because 26.c5 was also tempting and probably stronger. It threatens 27.c6. After 26...♖c7 27.♘e5 ♗xa4 28.♖b6 followed by ♖cb1, or 28.♖cb1 immediately, White is better.



Exercise: What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26...♘e4!

Objectively White is better, but "chess is a state of mind", as we learnt in previous games. Carlsen admitted that White was still better, but he felt that "maybe the worst was over."

The big difference between this position and the previous ones is that for the first time Black is able to activate his pieces.

As we remember from the previous volume, Timman remarked that one of Karpov's strengths at his peak was to maintain a position where he stood worse, avoiding risks but also avoiding the position becoming too simple, in order to keep chances for a win.

27.♘xe6 ♗xa4 28.d5 ♗d7 29.♗xe4?

This exchange loses all the advantage. It is, as often, a tactical mistake. There is a flaw in one of the several lines which White has to calculate.

Black will have serious difficulties after 29.♘d4!, threatening 30.c5. If 29...♘c5 then 30.♘c6!

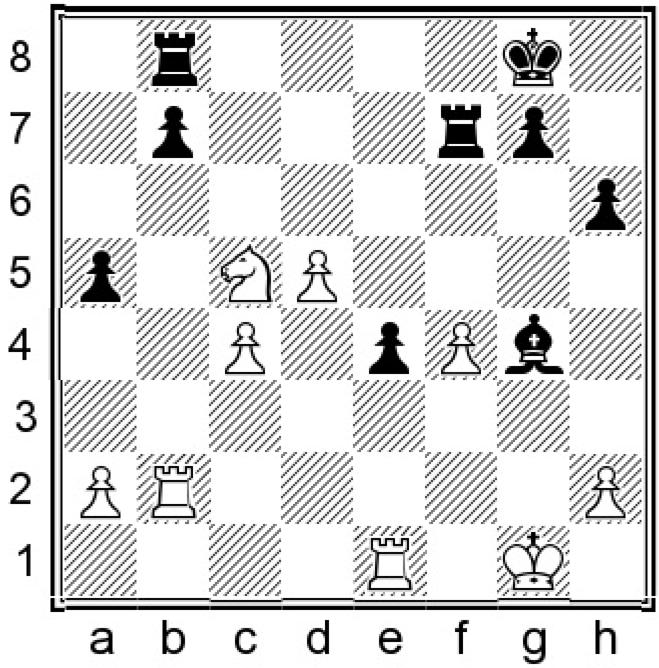
29...fxe4 30.♘c5 ♗g4

Who dares to call this bishop “bad” now?

31.♖e1

Apparently, this was a continuation of Eljanov’s calculation when he took on e4, because he played this and the previous moves very quickly.

White is no better after 31.♘xe4 ♖xf4 32.♘d6 ♖bf8.



Black is no worse now, but a draw looks highly likely.

Exercise: How did Carlsen maintain the tension?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

31...♖c8!

Not really creating a wild situation, but on the other hand the position after 31...♖xf4 32.♖xe4 ♖bf8 33.♖xf4 ♖xf4 34.♘xb7 ♗h3 35.♖b1 ♖xc4 36.d6 ♖d4 37.♔f2 was almost certainly a draw.

What Black played leads to a slightly more complex position, but it had a favourable practical effect, because Eljanov thought for 10 minutes before making his next move, which is the only one that maintains equality.

32.♘xe4 ♖xf4

The position is open, and Black now has a very good bishop, which can be dangerous for the white king. Anyway, the position is objectively equal, but White has more practical difficulties, and time trouble threatens to rear its ugly head.

33.♘d6 ♖cf8!

Carlsen began to play quickly. Now 34.♖xb7?? loses to 34...♗h3 35.♖bb1 ♖g4+ 36.♔h1 ♗g2+ and mate.

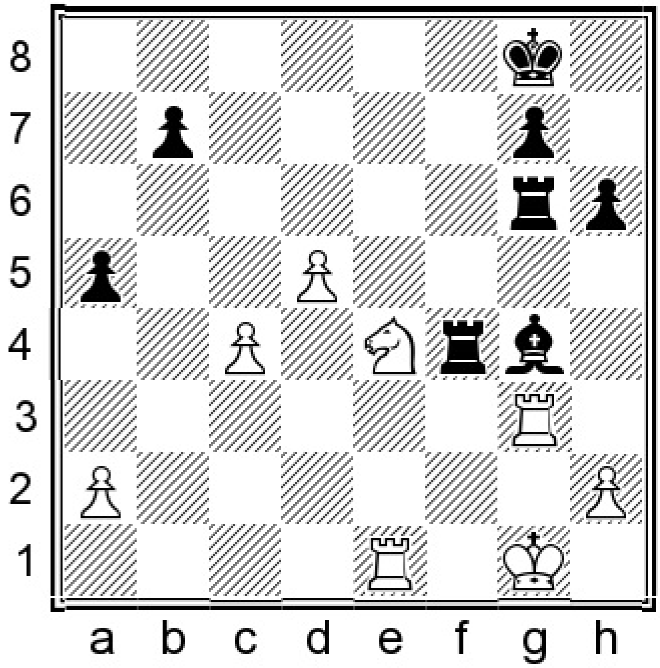
34.♖b3

Eljanov avoids ...♗h3; the position is still equal but the pressure is on White.

34...♖8f6 35.♘e4

Understandably, with not much time left, White doesn't want to go too far with his knight. Nonetheless, 35.♘xb7 was possible. After 35...a4 36.♖c3 ♖g6 37.♖g3 ♖xc4 White must play accurately, 38.h3!, and after exchanging rooks White maintains equilibrium.

35...♖g6 36.♖g3



The position remains equal, but Black has more practical chances. His mission is still to maintain the tension.

Exercise: What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

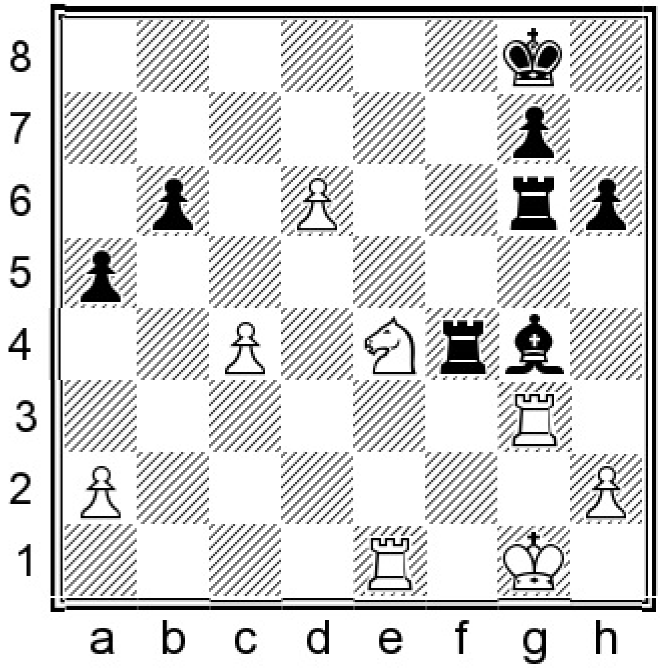
Answer:

36...b6!

Black removes all the poison threatened by 37.c5. Now Black would meet it with 37...bxc5, and after 38.♘xc5 Black has 38...h5! If then 39.h3 Black replies with 39...♖f3!, so White should play 39.♘e4, and after 39...h4 40.♖g2 ♔h7 41.d6 ♔h6 White must be careful again.

37.d6

White is also playing ambitiously. He had several playable moves, and if he wanted to play for a draw it was safer to play 37.h3 ♗f5 38.♖xg6 ♗xg6 39.♘d6, with similar chances.



Exercise: How did Carlsen maintain the tension again?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

37...♔h7!

Now the g6-rook is protected. White does not have the simplifying resource h3 anymore, and, after

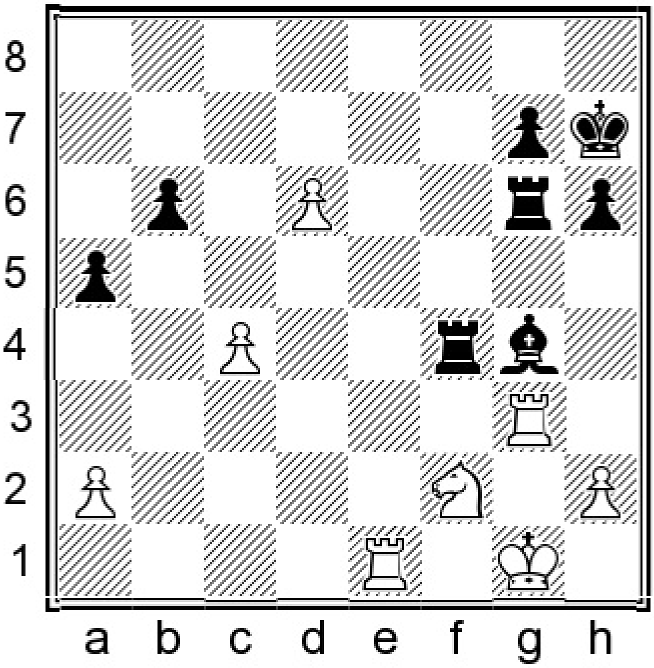
...♗f5, Black may retake with the king on g6, keeping his bishop on the c8-h3 diagonal.

38.♘f2?

Eljanov had 2 minutes left for the remaining three moves and suddenly collapsed, but with such little time left to decide it was no easy task.

38.♖ee3 ♗f5 39.♖xg6 ♔xg6 is not totally equal, as Black can continue pressing.

The engines propose the somewhat unnatural 38.h4, which is not that easy to play in time trouble, but is objectively good. After 38...♗f5 White has 39.h5! ♖xg3+ 40.♘xg3, and the white king is fine. After 40...♗g4 not 41.♖e4? ♖xe4 42.♘xe4 ♔g8 and Black has a better ending, but the knight's return move 41.♘e4. Then if 41...♔g8 42.♔g2 and the white king also enters the battle, while after 41...♗f5 White has 42.♘g3, repeating moves, if he wants.



Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen reply?

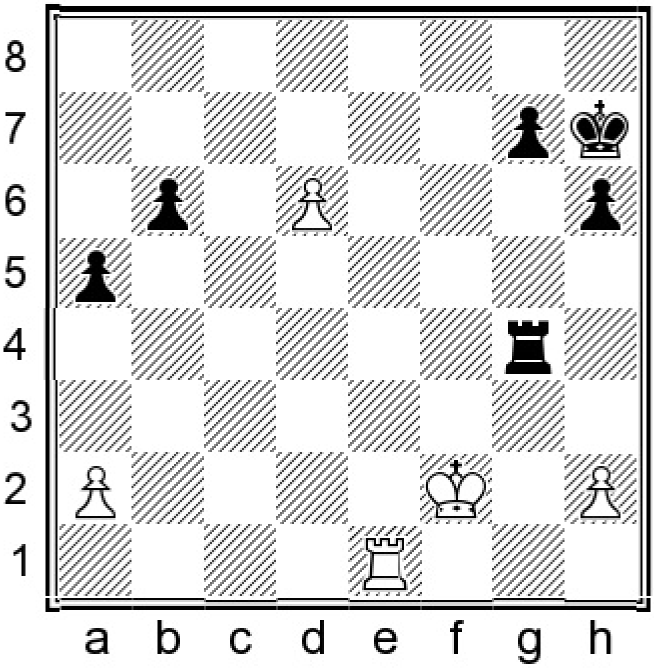
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

38...♖xc4

As simple as that. Black is better for the first time in the game. Suddenly, it is White who must play for a draw.

39.♘xg4 ♖gxg4 40.♖xg4 ♖xg4+ 41.♔f2



Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

41...♖d4!

As Tarrasch taught, the rook must be placed behind the passed pawn.

42.♖e6 ♔g8!

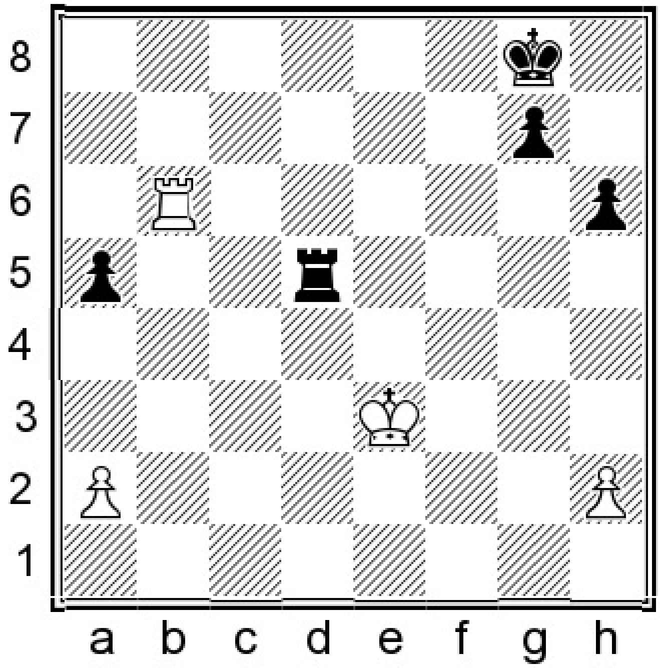
The king must enter the battle. Not 42...b5? 43.♔e3 ♖d1 44.♖e5 and the win is gone.

43.♔e3 ♖d1 44.d7

After 44.♔e4 ♔f7 45.♖e7+ ♔f6 46.♖d7 White is too passive and has to wait and see how his opponent progress, e.g. 46...g6 (46...h5 first is also good). Then Black wins after 47.♔e3 h5 48.♔e4 ♖d2 49.♔e3 ♖d5 50.♔e4 ♖d1 51.♔e3 ♔e5.

Advancing the pawns doesn't save White either, e.g. 47.h4 h5 48.a4 ♔e6 49.♖g7 ♔xd6 50.♖xg6+ ♔c5 51.♖g5+ ♔b4 52.♖b5+ ♔xa4 53.♖xb6 ♖h1, with an easy win.

44...♖xd7 45.♖xb6 ♖d5

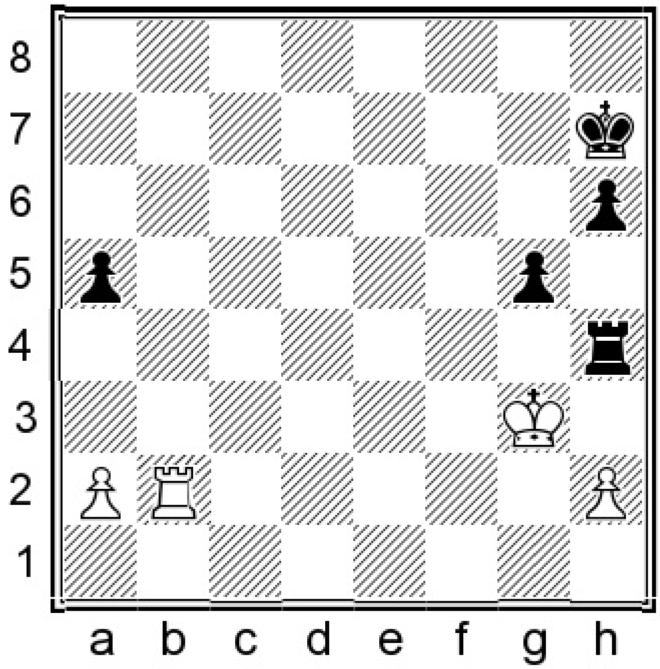


With his Laskerian + Karpovian strategy Carlsen has reversed the situation and now has a nearly winning advantage in the ending. There are few pawns left, so normally White would have good chances to draw, but here his pawns are too weak. White cannot afford to lose his h-pawn as this will give Black two connected passed pawns.

46.♖b2 ♔h7!

The king must now attack the opponent's camp.

47.♔e4 ♖h5 48.♔f4 ♖h4+ 49.♔g3 g5



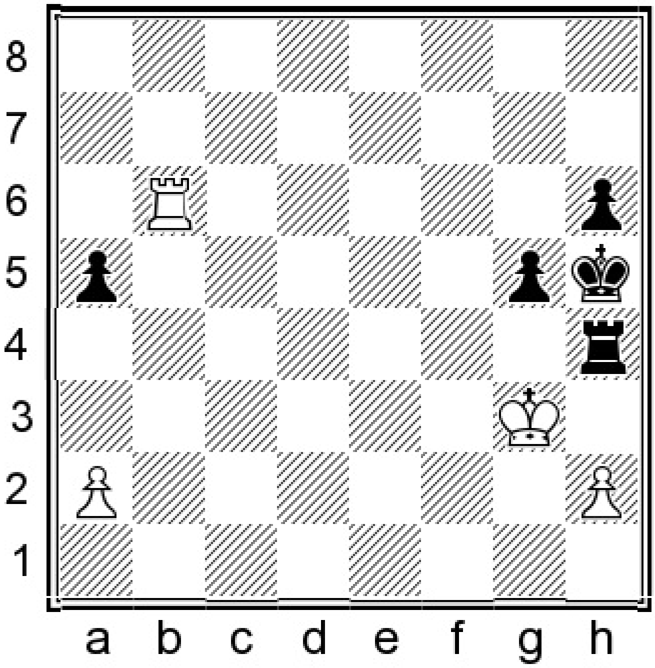
"Due to a lack of counterplay White is helpless against Carlsen's plan." (Karsten Mueller). The plan is to activate the king via g6-h5-h4, and play ...♖a4 to tie the white rook to the defence of the a-pawn.

50.♖b7+

White cannot activate his pieces either after 50.♖b6 ♖a4 51.h3 ♖xa2 52.♔g4, because 52...♖a4+ forces the king to retreat.

Further, White cannot improve his defence by placing his pawn on a3: after 50.♖b3 ♖a4 51.a3 ♔g6 52.h3 ♔h5 53.♖e3 ♖c4! White, due to the exposed position of his king, will be in zugzwang, e.g. 54.♖d3 ♖c6 55.a4 (or 55.♖e3 a4, planning 56...♖b6-b3, while White's rook must remain on the third rank to avoid a check by the black rook, capturing the a-pawn) 55...♖c4 56.♖a3 ♖b4, and White must allow the infiltration of the black king, 57.♔g2 ♔h4.

50...♔g6 51.♖b6+ ♔h5



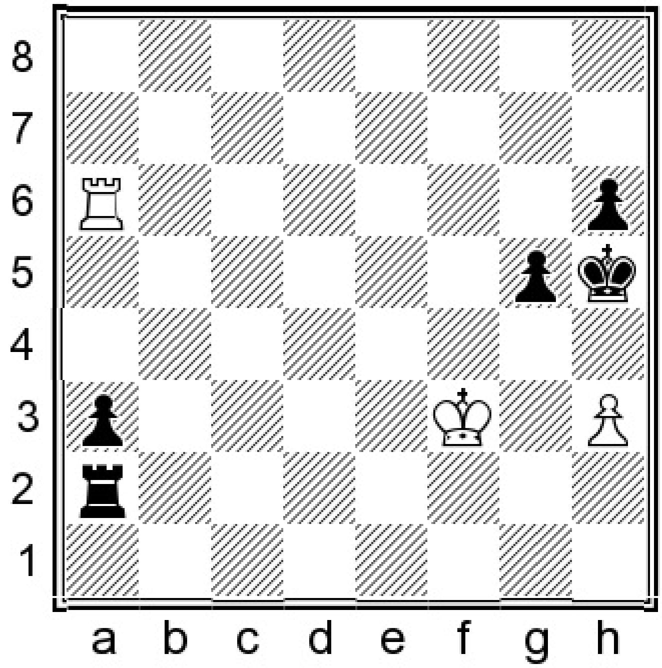
52.h3

White opts to activate his rook. After 52.♖b3 ♖a4 53.a3 Black would continue in a similar way to that we saw, e.g. 53...♖c4 followed by ...a4 and finally reach b3 with his rook.

52...♖a4 53.♖c6

53.♖b2 loses easily to 53...♖a3+ 54.♔g2 ♔h4.

53...♖a3+ 54.♔g2 ♖xa2+ 55.♔g3 a4 56.♖a6 a3 57.♔f3



Exercise: What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

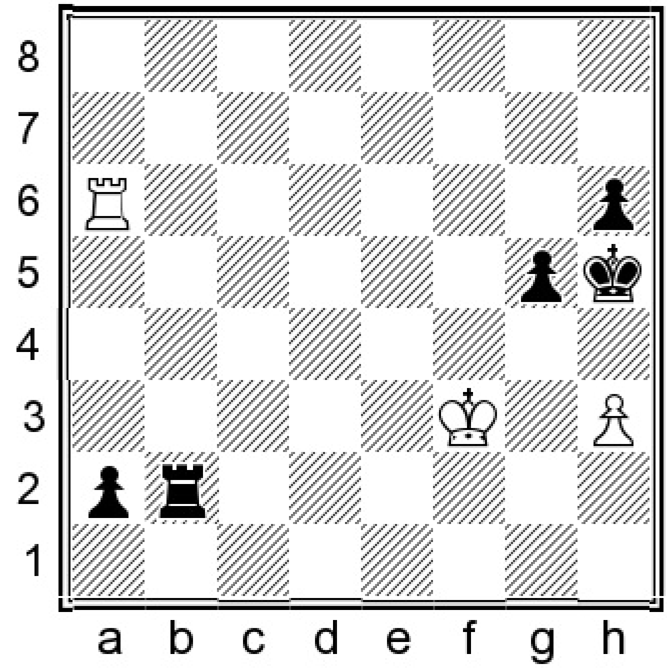
57...♖b2!

Black has to avoid playing 57...♖a1 and ...a2, as it could lead to a drawn ending with two useless pawns on the a- and h-files.

58.♔g3

58.♖xa3 loses to 58...♔h4, and the h-pawn falls.

58...a2 59.♔f3



Exercise: How did Carlsen finish off the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

59...a1=♕

And the pawn sacrifice delivers h4 for the king. Of course not 59...♔h4?? 60.♖xh6#

60.♖xa1 ♔h4

And the h-pawn is lost, e.g. 61.♖a6 h5 or 61.♖h1 ♖b3+ 62.♔g2 ♖g3+.

0–1

This game was a successful mix of the legacies of Lasker and Karpov.

Carlsen was worse. At first his main goal was to stay in the game, without allowing a further worsening of his position.

He succeeded, and at the same time he avoided allowing his opponent a clear path to a draw, as Karpov used to do (to be fair, a draw unwanted by Eljanov, too). Finally, his opponent made a clear mistake in time trouble and White's position was suddenly nearly lost.

This is what Carlsen said about the game: "I managed to equalize and at some point, in the time trouble, he went astray." Regarding the rook ending, he said he had to be careful to avoid the Vancura positions, but he didn't see how White would obtain them.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) White's early management of the position was excellent. He activated all his forces (12.♖fc1!) and then he proposed an atypical exchange of queens (13.♕a3!).

2). He activated his only inactive piece (19.♘g5! 20.f3!) and later reorganized his forces to sit on excellent squares (23.♘f2! 24.♘d3!).

3.) Remember basic endgame lessons, such as the rook behind the passed pawn and activating the king. (41...♖d4! 42...♔g8! 46...♔h7!).

4.) Avoid time trouble! (38.♘f2?).

5.) Always be alert. (*12...♗h5?* 29.♗xe4? 59...a1=♕! *59...♔h4??).*

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 18
Eugene Perelshteyn – Magnus Carlsen
Modern Defence [B06]
IoM Masters, Douglas (2), 20.06.2017

1.e4 g6 2.d4 ♗g7 3.♘c3 d6

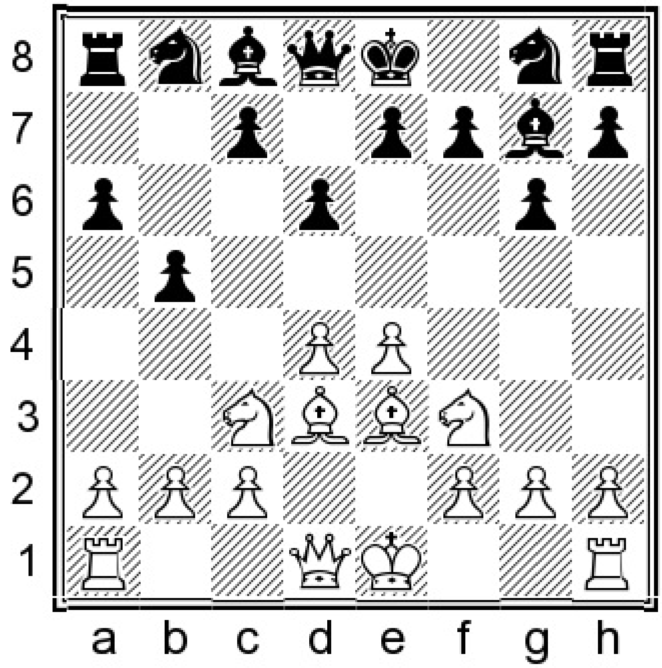
This game was played in the second round of the tournament, so you could be forgiven for thinking that it wasn't a must-win situation. However, it was a Swiss tournament, so for Carlsen it was a must-win, and this explains his choice, the Modern Defence again.

4.♗e3

"This move is clearly the most flexible and possibly the strongest," says Swedish Grandmaster Tiger Hillarp Persson, a big specialist in the Modern Defence.

White plays a useful move without deciding yet what to do with his f2-pawn. It can move to f3, f4, or stay where it is.

4...a6 5.♘f3 b5 6.♗d3



6...♘d7!

Question: I know we are still in the opening, so this must be theory, but 6...♗b7 is also a developing move. Why the exclamation mark for the knight move?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Play might end in a simple transposition of moves, but meanwhile Black must be ready to counterattack, so this is the most accurate move to prepare a quick ...c5 if it is needed.

As Hillarp Persson explained, after 6...♗b7 White could continue 7.a4 b4 8.♘e2 and here it is more important to have played 6...♘d7 in order to be able to play 8...c5, which, after 6...♗b7, is weak due to 9.dxc5!

7.e5

This aggressive advance is the main idea of White's set-up.

Black will not be able to make the natural move ...♘f6, and the situation of the black king may turn dangerous, but it is also a compromise, because soon White will be more or less forced to sacrifice this pawn to fight for an advantage, albeit with enough compensation,.

Exercise: How did Black reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

7...♗b7!

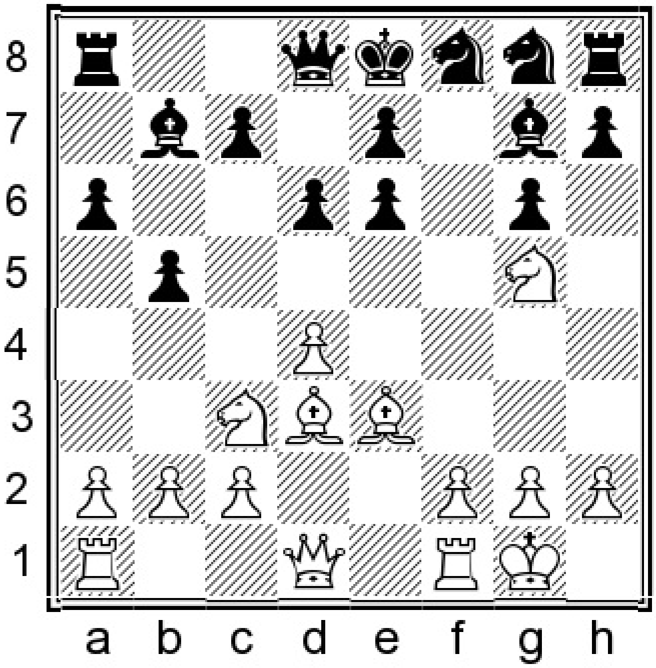
It was not really a sacrifice. After 7...dxe5?! 8.♗e4 ♖b8 9.dxe5 Black is paralysed; he cannot play 9...♘xe5? due to 10.♕xd8+ ♔xd8 11.0-0-0+ followed by 12.♗a7.

The other options are 7...e6, which is passive and must be played as a last resort according to Hillarp Persson, and 7...♘b6, but its usefulness is not totally clear.

8.e6!

Black threatened to take the pawn with 8...dxe5, and taking on d6 is not consistent with the previous aggressive advance, so this is the compromise entered into by playing 7.e5.

8...fxe6 9.♘g5 ♘f8 10.0-0



10...♕d7

Black plays a useful move, overprotecting e6 before deciding what to do with his g8-knight.

Question: I guess Black has several moves, but what about expulsing the annoying g5-knight with ...h6 at some point?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, Black must consider ...♘h6, ...♘f6 and what you suggest, ...h6, but in this case it is important to be alert to tactics, because that move weakens the kingside even more.

Let’s look at an example. The immediate 10...h6? was played in Svidler – McNab, Gothenburg 2005, and it was punished by 11.♗xg6+! ♘xg6 12.♘xe6 ♕d7 13.♘xg7+ ♔f7 14.♘h5.

10...♘f6 11.♖e1 h6? is wrong again due to the same line: 12.♗xg6+! ♘xg6 13.♘xe6 ♕d7 14.♘xg7+ ♔f7 15.♘h5 b4 16.♘xf6 exf6 17.♘e2 ♖ae8, with insufficient compensation for the pawn, Ernst-Hillarp Persson, Vastgota 2002.

11.♖e1! ♘f6 12.a4

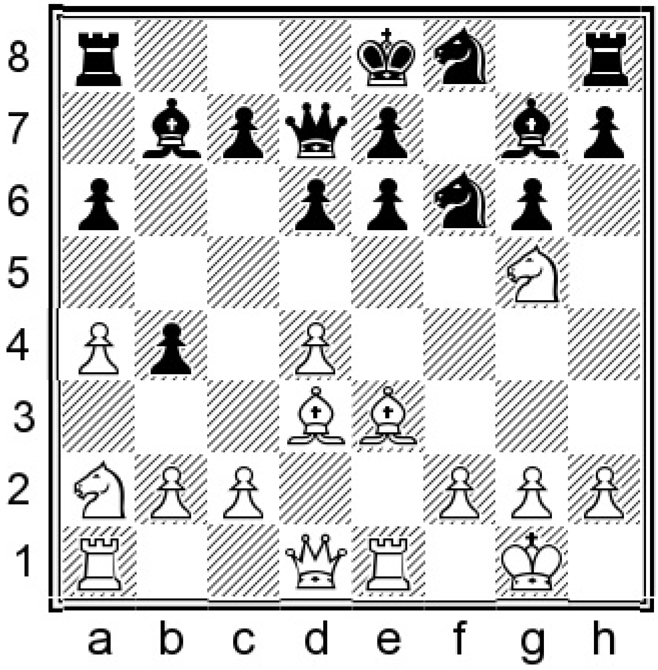
The alternative is 12.♗d2, and at this point you are right, the best continuation seems to be 12...h6 13.♘f3 g5. There is no immediate punishment here, although White has enough compensation for the pawn.

12...b4 13.♘a2!

Question: Really? This knight doesn’t look great on a2, isn’t 13.♘ce4 better?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: White is a pawn down, so he shouldn’t exchange pieces if there is no clear reason. Most of Black’s troubles are gone after 13.♘ce4?! h6 14.♘xf6+ exf6 15.♘f3 g5 followed by ...♔f7.



Exercise: The position is complicated, what did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

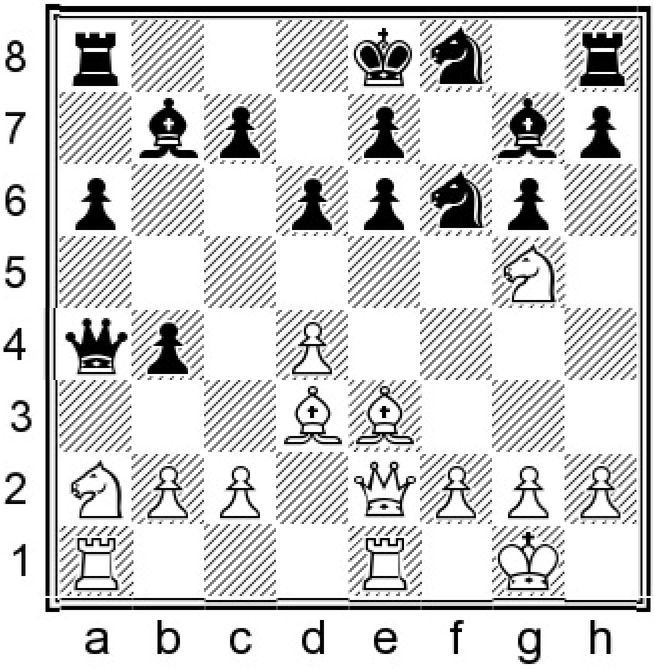
Answer:

13...♕xa4!

Black's only trump card is his pawn advantage, but just defending it with 13...a5?! allows White to open lines with 14.c3!. After e.g. 14...h6 15.♘f3 bxc3 16.♘xc3 ♔f7 17.♗d2 g5 and now 18.♗c4, 18.♖c1 or just 18.h3, Black has problems with his king, poor development and poor coordination.

Now Black is two pawns up and White must find compensation.

14.♕e2!



White plays very well, with "A strong developing move that prevents the advance of the a-pawn. Carlsen now sank into deep thought." (Timman).

Exercise: The game has reached a critical moment. What would you play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14...h6?

Black misses an opportunity to untie his pieces, an opportunity that will not be repeated for a long time.

He could play 14...c5!, and after 15.dxc5 ♕c6 16.f3 dxc5 Black still has two extra pawns, but his problems with his king and coordination persist, so White has compensation.

The engines suggest 17.c4 (to prevent 17...♘d5, which would follow 17.c3 (17...♘d5), although this is not bad for White) and Black must choose between 17...a5 followed by ...a4 and 17...♘8d7, which seems the best choice, defending c5 and supporting ...e5 if necessary.

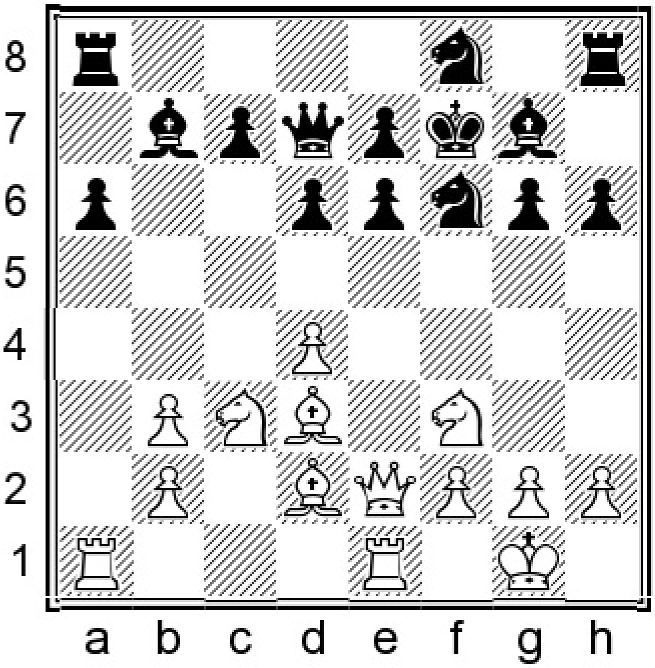
15.♘f3 ♔f7

This move is more useful than 15...g5 at the moment. White would also play 16.♗d2! in that case.

16.♗d2! b3 17.♘c3

A difficult choice. 17.♘b4 was also good, and it would maintain White's healthy pawn structure. However, that is not so important here and White is better after 17...♕d7 18.c3 a5 19.♗b5!. Then if 19...c6 White has the elegant 20.♘d3! ♘d5 (20...cxb5? 21.♘de5+) 21.♗a4, recovering one of the pawns.

17...♕d7 18.cxb3



White has recovered one of his two missing pawns, and the one on a6 is not very safe either. Black has no active play and the chances of untangling his pieces soon are not great.

Exercise: Black has several moves at his disposal, but he needs to play according to what the position offers. What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

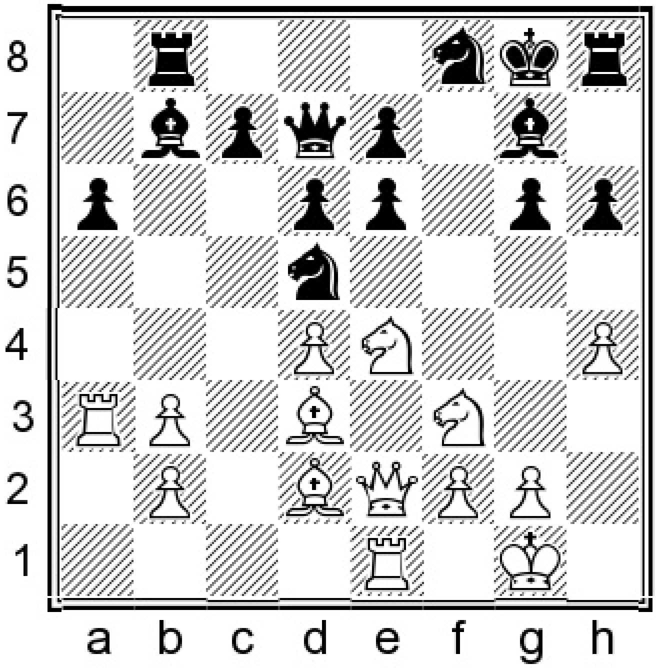
18...♖b8!

Black prepares to activate one of the few pieces that could be activated in the future. He abandons the a6-pawn to try to obtain control of the b-file.

19.♖a3 ♘d5 20.♘e4 ♔g8

The engines prefer 20...g5 first, but at the board it is not easy to weaken his fight for the b1-h7 diagonal without a clear justification.

21.h4!



Stopping the move ...♔h7 because of h5.

Exercise: What did Carlsen play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21...♕e8!

A move that resembles 18...♖b8!. The queen heads for f7 where it will defend both e6 and g6, and maybe the queen will get some activity on the f-file.

One of the principal suggestions of the engines is the strange 21...♖h7.

22.♗xa6 ♗xa6 23.♕xa6 ♗f6

Here the engines prefer 23...♕b5, but White's position is easier to play after 24.♕xb5 ♖xb5 25.♘c3 ♘xc3 26.bxc3 followed by b4.

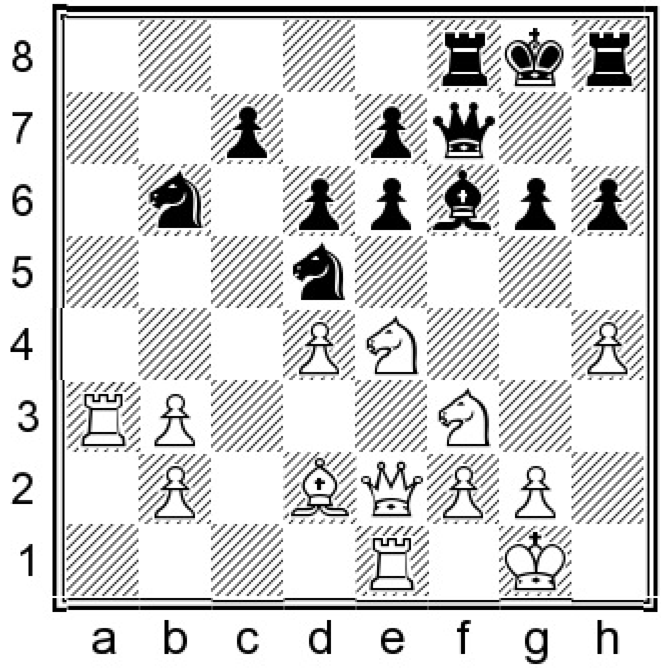
24.♕c4 ♘d7

For the first time this knight dreams of an active position.

25.♘c3 ♘7b6 26.♕e2 ♕f7 27.♘e4

Black has no problems after 27.♕xe6 ♕xe6 28.♖xe6 ♔f7. We will talk about something similar very soon.

27...♖f8



28.♘xf6+?

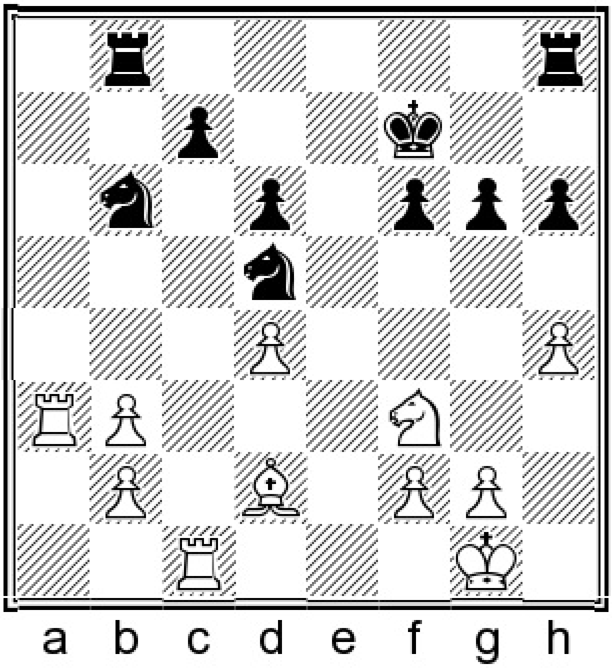
After having been two pawns down, White grabs the second opportunity to be a pawn up, but, as would have been the case on the previous move, the pawn is not very useful. Black solves all his problems of coordination and White's advantage is almost gone.

Black's troubles would be greater after 28.b4!, followed by b5, fixing the weakness of c7. Black wouldn't have the freedom that he now gets.

28...exf6 29.♕xe6 ♕xe6 30.♖xe6 ♔f7

The strong knight on d5 defends c7 and White's material advantage consists of a doubled pawn on the b-file.

31.♖e1 ♖b8 32.♖c1



Black has several moves at his disposal, but, as before, it’s necessary to play according to a plan or general strategy.

Exercise: What did Carlsen choose?

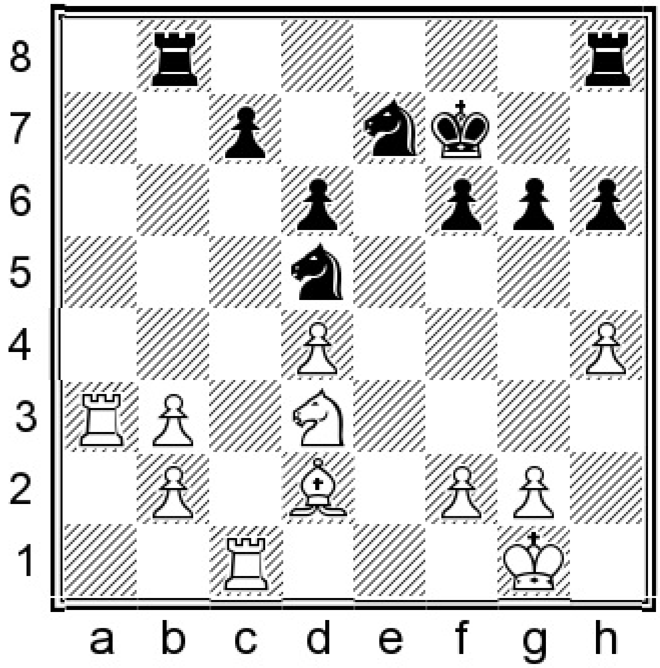
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

32...♘c8!

This knight is the piece that, undoubtedly, has a better place than b6 to head to, so Carlsen follows “Makagonov’s rule”, which says “improve your worst piece”.

33.♘e1 ♘ce7 34.♘d3



Exercise: What did Carlsen play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

34...g5!

Black plays this move at the best moment. It stops 35.♘f4 and he becomes active on the kingside.

Black's position is preferable – not by much, but the pressure is on White.

35.hxg5 hxg5 36.b4?!

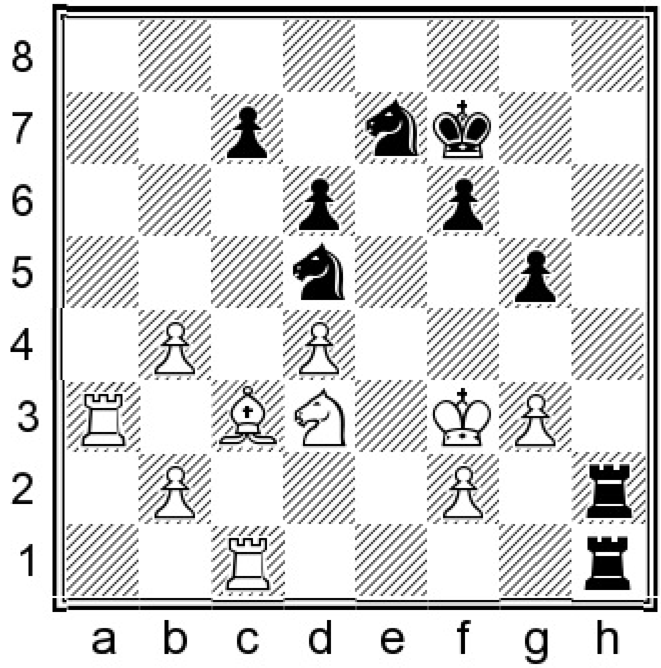
36.g3 was slightly better, but the problems for White remain after 36...♖h5 or 36...♘f5 37.♗c3 ♖h3, planning ...♖bh8.

36...♖h4 37.♗c3 ♖bh8 38.g3

This is the only way to avoid immediate defeat.

White cannot play 38.♔f1 because of 38...♘f4!.

38...♖h1+ 39.♔g2 ♖8h2+ 40.♔f3



Black has quickly and successfully activated almost all his forces.

Exercise: How did Carlsen exploit his superior activity?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

40...g4+!

Black now gets a strong rook on the seventh rank, as 41.♔e2? is answered by 41...♘f5! and White cannot avoid 42...♘xg3+.

41.♔xg4 ♖xc1 42.♘xc1 ♖xf2

White is still a pawn up, but this is unimportant. His king is in danger.

43.♗e1

Returning the pawn to try to defend his king.

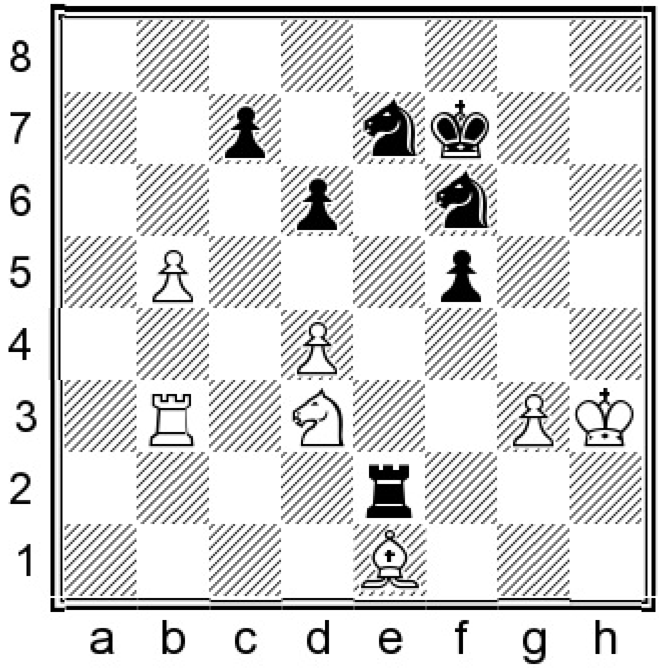
43...f5+ 44.♔h3 ♖xb2 45.♘d3 ♖c2

The engines like 45...♖b1, but Carlsen prefers to continue attacking the king rather than capturing the b-pawn.

46.b5 ♘f6!

This knight was not the “worst” piece, but it can also be improved. It heads to g4 or e4.

47.♖b3 ♖e2



“With superior play, Carlsen has created an advantage.” (Timman).

48.b6?

This leads to a quick defeat. 48.♖b2 ♖e3 49.♖b3 ♘ed5 was also painful, and after 50.♔g2 Black’s offensive is winning, e.g. 50...♘e4 51.♗f2 ♖e2 52.♖b2 ♘xf2.

After the more tenacious 48.♗a5 Black would be much better anyway. Let’s see the best sequence for both sides indicated by the engines: 48...♘ed5 49.♘f4 ♘xf4+ 50.gxf4 ♘d5 51.♔g3 ♔e7 52.b6 cxb6 53.♗xb6 ♖a2! (threatening 54...♖a6, trapping the bishop) 54.♖b5 ♖a3+ 55.♔f2 ♔e6 followed by ...♘xf4, and Black is winning.

48...cxb6 49.♖xb6

This loses, but of course not capturing the pawn is no better.

49...♘e4

Black threatens 50.-- 50...♘g5+ 51.♔h4 ♘f3+ and mate. If now 50.♖b2 then 50...♘g5+ 51.♔h4 ♘f3+ 52.♔h3 ♖xb2 53.♘xb2 ♘xe1.

0–1

Carlsen again chose the risky Modern Defence to play for a win, and this time his opponent opted for one of the more aggressive lines.

The world champion made a mistake and got a clearly worse position. He defended in the best way possible, but continued to be worse.

The tension was very high till move 27, when White decided to simplify, winning a pawn but giving Carlsen a safe position.

After that, playing accurately, Carlsen outplayed his opponent.

This is what Perelshteyn wrote on Twitter: “Had World Champ Magnus Carlsen on the ropes...he defended well and outplayed me from a slightly better endgame! Great fight.”

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) “In for a penny, in for a pound.” Sometimes we need to gain or even increase a material advantage to compensate for other shortcomings. Then we may return the material at the proper moment. (13...♕xa4!).

2.) With less space don’t miss the opportunity to activate or prepare the activation of your forces. (*14...c5!* 18...♖b8! 21...♕e8!).

3.) Maximize the activity of your pawns! (*28.b4!* 34...g5!).

4.) Maximize the activity of your pieces! (18...♖b8! 32...♘c8! 46...♘f6!).

5.) Try to find the correct answer to: “Which piece should I exchange? Which one should I keep?”. (*23...♕b5?* 28.♘xf6+?).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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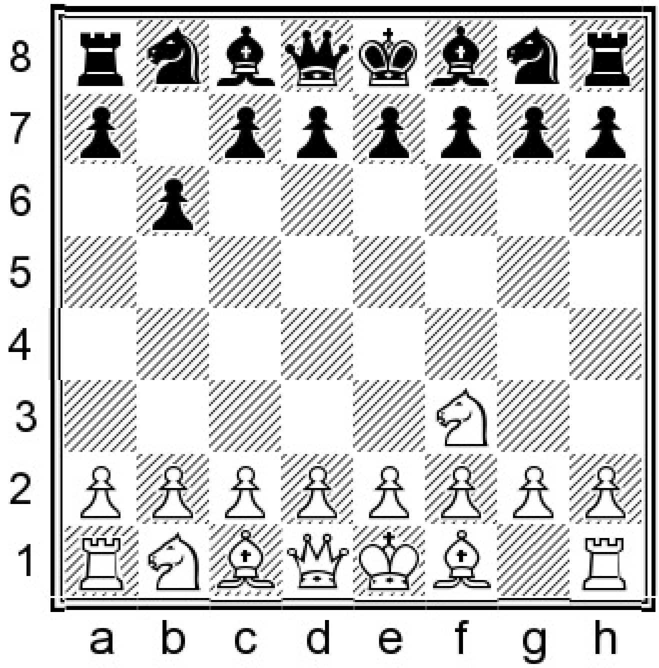
Game 19

Pavel Eljanov – Magnus Carlsen

Owen’s Defence [B00]

IoM Masters, Douglas (6), 28.09.2017

1.♘f3 b6



Question: What a strange opening! Why did he play it?

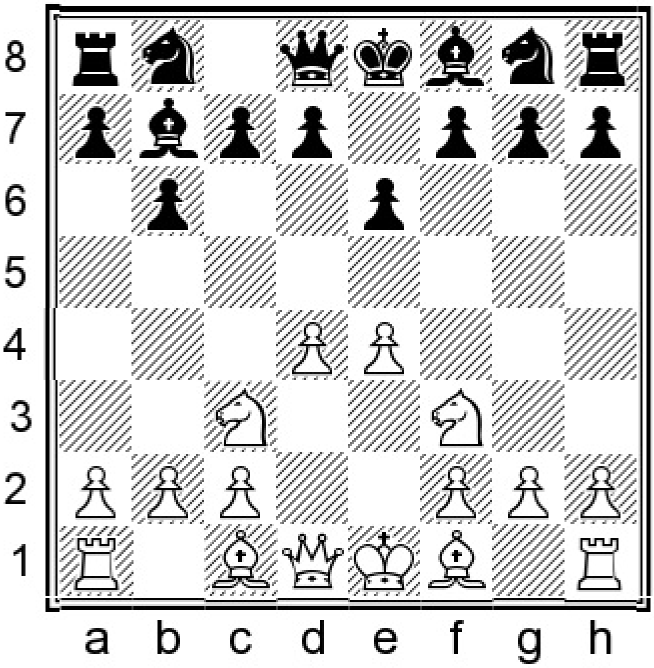
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen said: “I prepared for 1.d4 and then he played 1.♘f3. Then I thought this is best.”

This game was played in the same very strong open tournament on the Isle of Man as Game 18, so Carlsen had a different attitude than in usual top-level tournaments. “I try to do some things that I might not allow myself to do in other events,” said Carlsen.

In his other two games as Black prior to this round, he had played the Modern Defence and Nimzowitsch Defence. Carlsen scored 2.5 points out of 3 in those games (i.e. including Game 18).

2.e4 ♗b7 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4



Exercise: What did Carlsen play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

4...♗b4

This is the reason why Carlsen went for the Owen only after 1.♘f3. Had White played 1.e4, then after 1...b6 the game could have continued 2.d4 ♗b7 3.♗d3, avoiding this pin. Instead of an early ♘c3 he could defend his e-pawn with ♕e2, play ♘f3 next and decide later where to put his b1-knight. It could go to c3 or to d2, and in this case he may continue with ♘f1-g3. The same could happen after 1.d4 b6 2.e4.

5.♗d3 ♘f6 6.♕e2 d5

This is better than 6...0-0? 7.e5, where Black must play the unwanted 7...♗xf3, because 7...♘d5? loses to the typical combination 8.♗xh7+!

7.exd5

This is considered stronger than 7.e5 ♘e4 8.♗d2 ♗xc3 9.bxc3 c5, and Black has scored decent results.

7...♕xd5

It is better to activate the queen than move the knight from f6 playing 7...♘xd5.

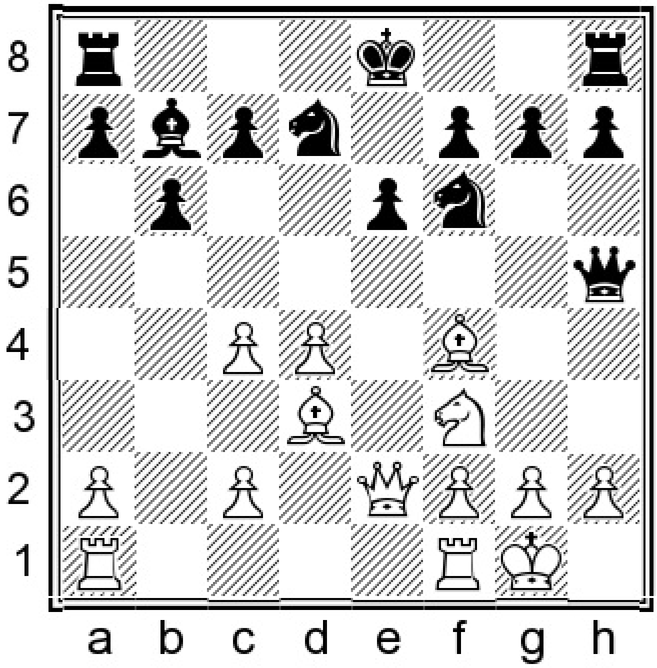
8.0-0 ♗xc3 9.bxc3

White has doubled pawns, but they are not weak currently as they can’t be attacked in the near future, and the two bishops are reasonable compensation.

9...♘bd7 10.c4

White can’t exploit the fact that Black hadn’t castled with 10.♗a3 because Black plays 10...♕h5, threatening to play 11...♗xf3, followed by 12...♘d5 and castling long if necessary, or else 12...c5.

10...♕h5 11.♗f4



11...♖c8

If 11...c5 White can play 12.d5.

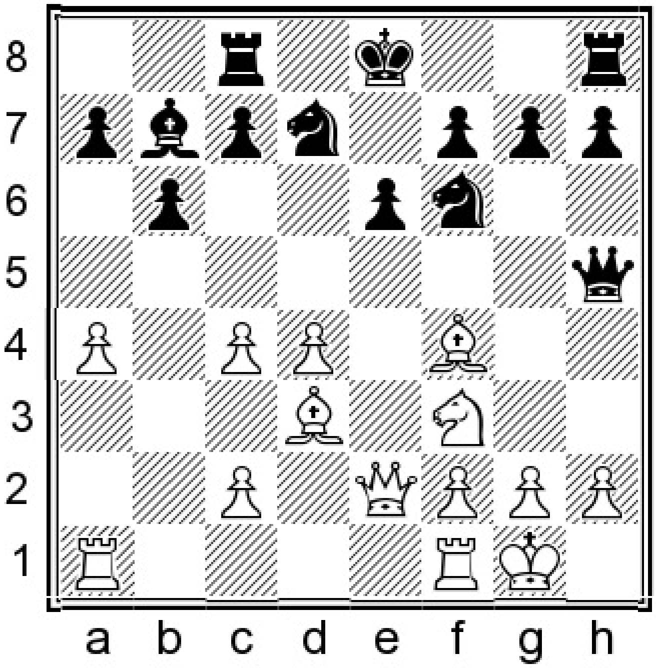
Question: Why not 11...♗xf3 now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It is possible, but after 12.gxf3 ♖c8 (12...0-0-0 13.c5 is too risky) White can play 13.♔h1 followed by ♖g1, and his weak pawn structure is not relevant yet, while White has active play along three half-open files.

12.a4

White only cedes squares with 13.d5?!. Black could continue 13...♘c5 and then castle.



Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12...a5!

“A very ambitious move. I didn’t want to trade off this pawn and I am hoping that the a4 pawn will become a weakness eventually.” (Carlsen).

13.♖ab1

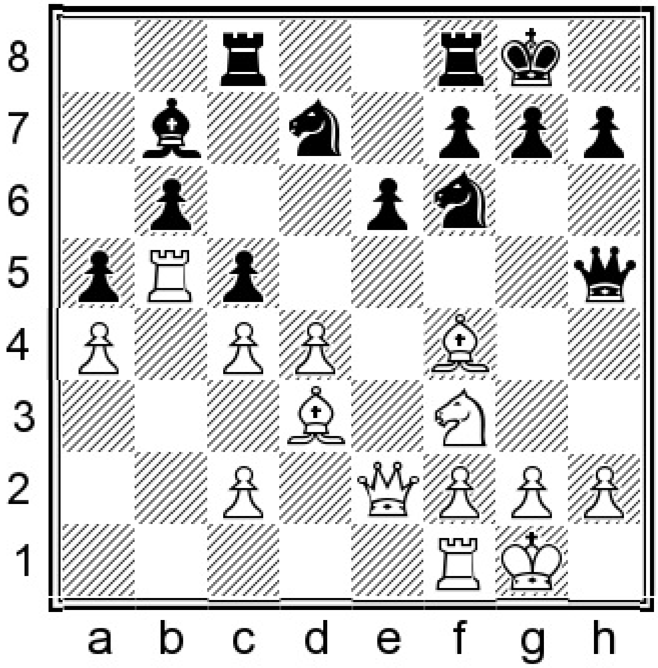
White wants to use the b-file to harass the black queen.

As Carlsen said, Eljanov only plays for a win, especially when he is White. Here he could have played more quietly: “At any moment, like here, White can play 13.♘d2 ♕xe2 14.♗xe2, and White is slightly better, but nothing special.” (Carlsen). However, Eljanov decided to maintain the tension.

13...0-0 14.♖b5

This was the idea. 14.♖fe1 was another good option.

14...c5



15.dxc5?!

Carlsen believed that 15.♗d6 was critical. He was going to reply 15...♗c6, and after 16.♗xf8 he was not sure whether to choose 16...♗xb5, which gives a good game, or 16...♔xf8, with enough compensation for the exchange.

In 2017, after 15.c3 ♗c6, the engines proposed the exchange sacrifice 16.♖fb1. “If Black had accepted it, he would have straitjacketed himself, especially in view of his knights’ limited elbow-room. White has sufficient compensation.” (Timman).

Anyway, this was a difficult practical decision. In July 2020 the stronger versions of those engines are not as keen on the sacrifice as before, but it was playable.

Commenting on the text move, 15.dxc5, Timman said: “After this anti-positional exchange White goes downhill strategically.”

Question: If 15.dxc5 is clearly wrong, why did a player like Eljanov play it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Modern chess is very concrete. If something looks bad, generally it is, but on some or even on many occasions, it is tactics that decide if it is good or not.

It seems that Eljanov was still ambitious, but made a tactical mistake in some of the lines he trusted.

15...♖xc5 16.♗d6?!

White was still playing for a win. He didn’t realise that it was time to think about playing safe with

16.♘e5, and the most likely result is a draw after 16...♕xe2 17.♗xe2 ♗a6 18.♖xc5 ♘xc5 19.♖b1 ♘fd7 20.♘xd7 ♘xd7 21.♗e3.

16...♖xb5 17.cxb5?

This is the decisive mistake that loses the game. “I think he horribly misjudged the arising position. His bishop on d3 is quite bad and there are weaknesses on a4 and c2.” (Carlsen).

“The computer assesses the position after 17.axb5 as equal, but I daresay that everyone would prefer to play this position as Black.” (Timman). After 17...♖c8 18.♘e5 White is still in the game, but of course this was not Eljanov’s idea when he played 16.♗d6.

17...♖c8

It was possible to continue 17...♗xf3, which is fine, but there is no hurry and it is not necessary, as the bishop is also a strong piece.

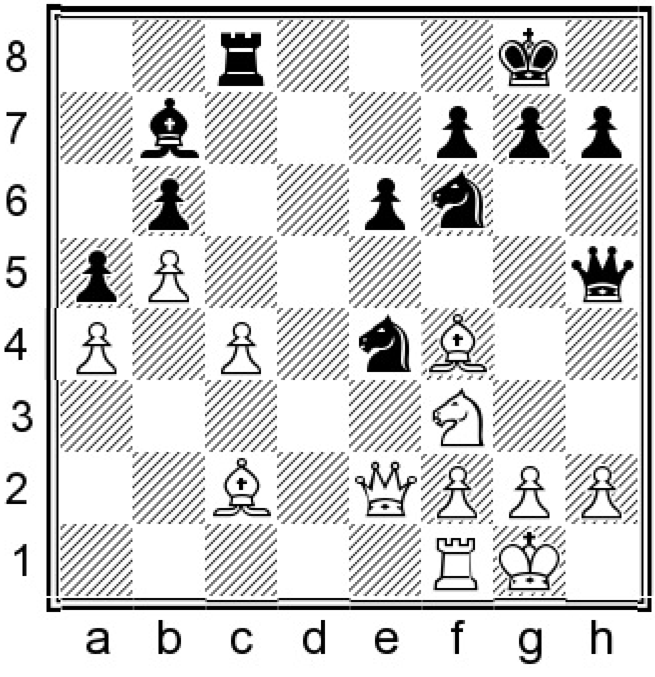
18.c4

Controlling d5, but of course now both a4 and c4 are weak.

18...♘c5 19.♗c2 ♘ce4 20.♗f4?

The unprotected bishop is now a tactical weakness.

Black is better, but 20.♗g3 was more tenacious. After the other retreat, 20.♗e5, play could continue 20...♘g5 21.♘d4 ♕xe2 22.♘xe2 ♖xc4 and Black takes one of the weak white pawns.



Exercise: How did Carlsen obtain an almost winning advantage?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20...♘c3

“After only 20 moves Black is already winning. Carlsen rounds things off expertly.” (Timman).

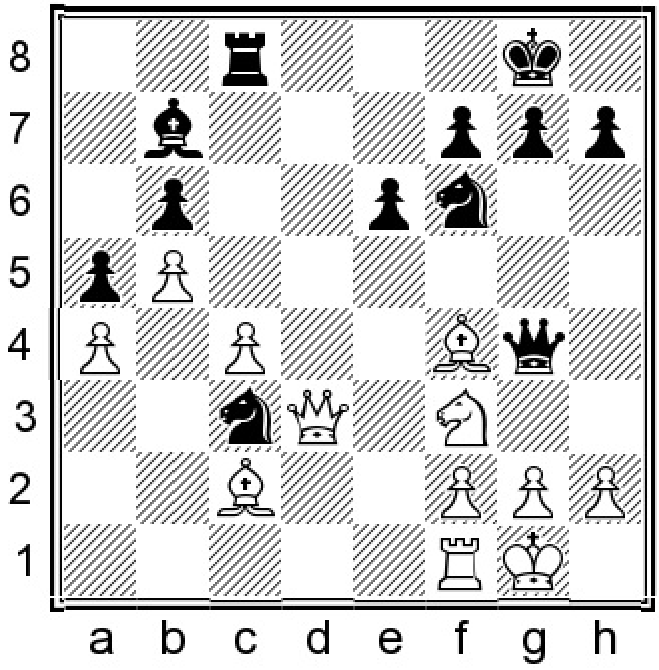
21.♕d3

Or 21.♕e3 ♕g4 (21...♖xc4 22.♕xb6 “is not that clear,” said Carlsen) 22.♕xc3 ♘d5, and now after 23.♘e5 the world champion was planning the elegant 23...♕xg2+! 24.♔xg2 ♘xf4+ 25.♔g3 ♘e2+.

If 23.h3 then Black has 23...♘xc3 24.hxg4 ♘e2+ 25.♔h2 ♘xf4, and White still has his weaknesses on the queenside. Carlsen also mentioned 23...♕xf4. After e.g. 24.♕d3 the simple 24...♘f6 is good, but 24...♕xc4 25.♕xh7+ ♔f8 is stronger. Black has more activity and better chances.

21...♕g4

Once again, Black could have taken on f3. After 21...♗xf3 22.gxf3 ♕g6+ 23.♕xg6 (or 23.♔h1 ♕xd3 24.♗xd3 ♘xa4) 23...hxg6 Black wins the a-pawn, because 24.♗d3? loses to 24...♖d8! 25.♗c2 ♘e2+.



22.♗e5

This move loses a pawn without a fight, but White’s position was already untenable.

After 22.♕xc3 Carlsen showed the line 22...♕xf4 23.♘e5 ♘g4! 24.♘xg4 ♕xg4, and the c4-pawn is lost.

In case of 23.♘d2 Black has 23...♘g4 24.g3 ♕e5! 25.♕xe5 (or 25.♕d3 ♕h5 26.h4 ♘e5) 25...♘xe5 26.♖d1 and now the luft 26...g5! followed by ...g4 gives Black an overwhelming advantage. Not only the bishop, but all white pieces are passive and the weaknesses remain.

22...♕xc4 23.♕xc4 ♖xc4

Carlsen has won a pawn and gained the d5 square, and all his pieces are optimally placed. Black threatens 25...♘e2+.

24.♗d3 ♖c8 25.♖a1

Passive, but there is nothing better. Exchanging on c3 is hopeless.

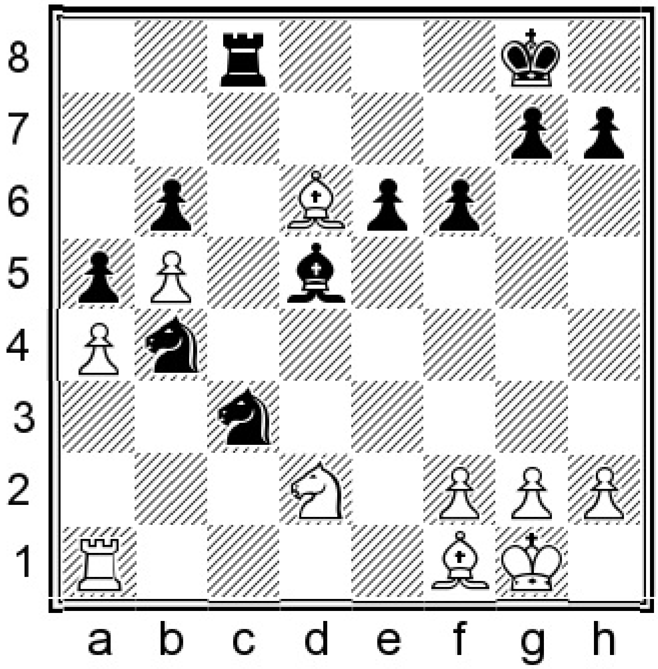
25...♘fd5

Carlsen rejects the good exchange 25...♗xf3, but the text is equally strong.

26.♘d2 f6 27.♗d6

27.♗xc3 ♖xc3 is obviously hopeless.

27...♘b4 28.♗c4 ♗d5 29.♗f1



Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen finish off this game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

29...♘ba2

Winning a second pawn.

0–1

Carlsen played a rare opening. He soon achieved a slightly better position and his opponent collapsed quickly, possibly due to a tactical miscalculation when he was still trying to gain an advantage.

This was Magnus's sixth victory in all six games that he and Eljanov had played with a classical time control. That score was partially explained by Carlsen, saying: "He's usually quite ambitious with the white pieces," and he added "He doesn't play for a draw and maybe that's why I have such a good record against him."

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Any change to the pawn structure, such as releasing the tension, requires careful analysis. (12...a5! 15.dxc5? 17.cxb5?).

2.) It is difficult, but very useful, to detect the moment when a positional sacrifice is the best option. (*16...♔xf8! 16.♖fb1!*) (commented on move 15).

3.) Having the two bishops frequently gives you reason to be optimistic, but you need to understand clearly if it is so much of an advantage that you can take risks. (15.dxc5? 16.♗d6?).

4.) It's important to remain on the lookout for "tactical weaknesses" in both your own and the opponent's camp. (20.♗f4?).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

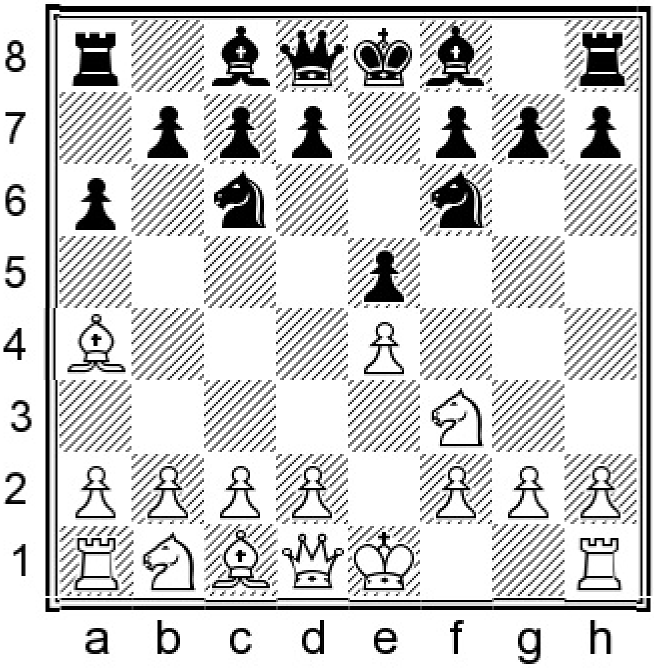
Game 20

Fabiano Caruana – Magnus Carlsen

Ruy Lopez [C78]

IoM Masters, Douglas (8), 30.09.2017

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♘f6



Question: I see this game is from the same tournament as the previous two games. What a change of opening! Why is this?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, in this game, facing an elite opponent, Carlsen returned to what we could call part of his “normal” repertoire, a Ruy Lopez.

Nonetheless, the Archangelsk Variation was not his main defence against 1.e4, though he played it in the very important 9th game of his World Championship match against Karjakin in 2016, and again less than two months before this game, in Saint Louis in 2017.

5.0-0 b5 6.♗b3 ♗c5 7.c3

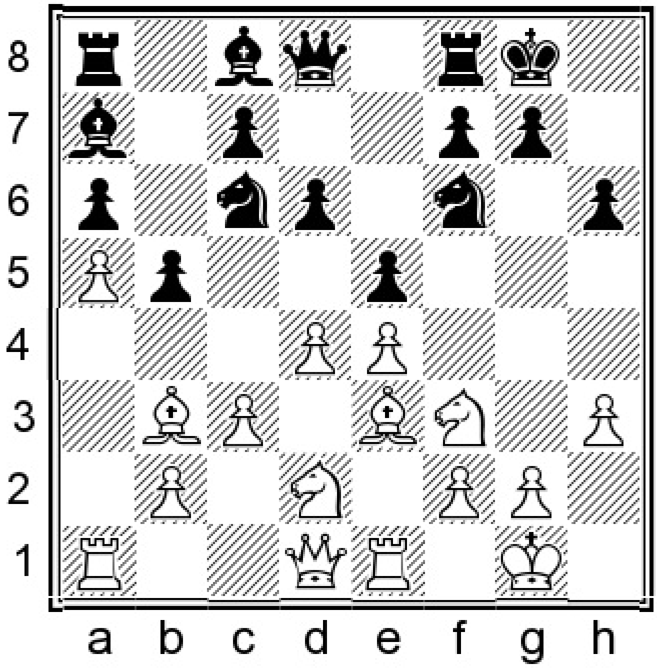
Anand – Carlsen, Saint Louis 2017, followed a different path: 7.♘c3 0-0 8.d3 d6 9.♘d5 h6 10.c3 ♖b8 11.♖e1 ♗a7, and it finished in a draw.

7...d6 8.a4 ♖b8 9.d4 ♗b6 10.a5

In Karjakin – Carlsen, New York 2016, “Karjakin decided to go for the main and most principled line, immediately grabbing the b-pawn,” commented Caruana after the well-known moves 10.axb5 axb5 11.♘a3 0-0 12.♘xb5 ♗g4 13.♗c2 exd4 14.♘bxd4 ♘xd4 15.cxd4 ♗xf3 16.gxf3 ♘h5 17.♔h1.

Karjakin began to outplay Carlsen. White got a winning position, with Karjakin already leading 1-0 and the match being best of 12 games. Hence a win would have almost certainly decided the match, but Carlsen miraculously saved the game. He later equalized the score, and finally retained his title winning the tie-break.

10...♗a7 11.h3 0-0 12.♗e3 ♖a8 13.♖e1 h6 14.♘bd2



Question: I guess this continuation is also very common, right?

Show/Hide Solution

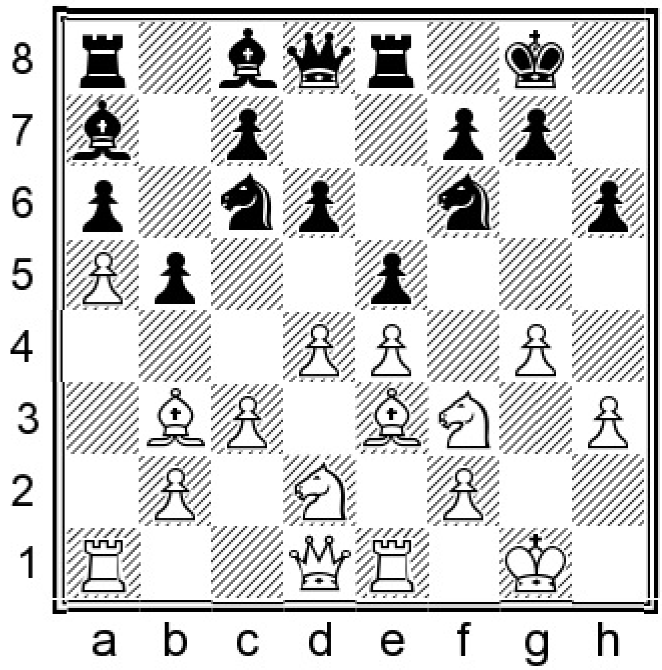
Answer: Yes, it is. There are a lot of sub-variations, though. Caruana even had this exact position in the previous round, also with the white pieces, against Gawain Jones, who chose 14...exd4. After 15.cxd4 ♘b4, Fabiano launched a strong attack with 16.e5! ♘fd5 17.♘e4 ♘xe3 18.♖xe3 ♗b7 19.e6 ♘d5 20.exf7+ ♔h8 21.♖e1 ♖xf7 22.♖c1 ♖c8 23.♘fg5! winning quickly.

14...♖e8

“What I did was safer than what Gawain Jones did yesterday,” said Carlsen after the game.

Caruana had had this exact position before, three times, but playing with the black pieces: against Gashimov at Wijk aan Zee 2012, when White played 15.♗c2, against Kobalia in Plovdiv 2012, when White chose the less critical 15.dxe5, and against Karjakin in Loo 2013, when White sacrificed a pawn with 15.♘f1; all games ended in a draw.

15.g4!



“But still I did not feel safe after what he did...It is extremely dangerous [for Black],” added Carlsen.

Carlsen looked uncomfortable and thought for more than half an hour.

Even after his win he couldn’t hide how much he had suffered during the first part of the game.

Question: Why is that?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Because Carlsen realised that he was playing against a strong opponent who was much better prepared. Carlsen had to figure out the many hidden possibilities in the position, while Caruana only had to remember his analysis.

15...♕e7?!

And his reaction was not the best. A “normal” move like 15...♗b7 is bad due to 16.g5, but the engines show two acceptable ways to play for Black.

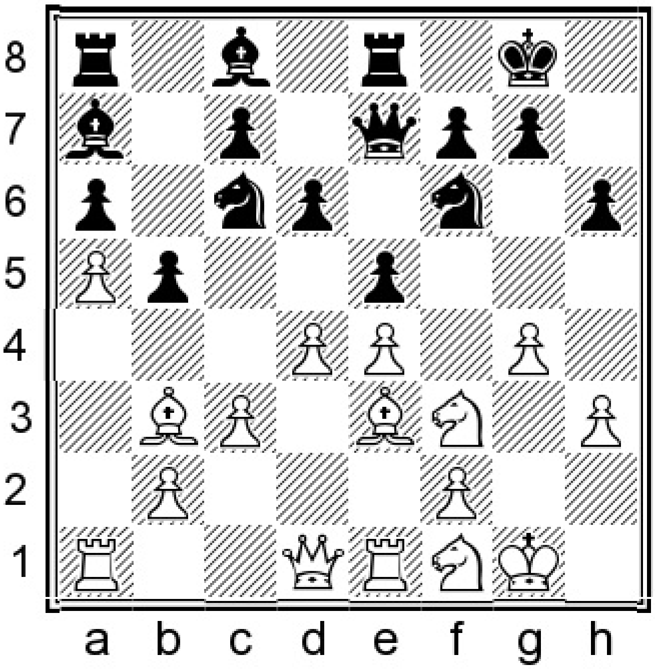
One is 15...♕d7, also with the idea of vacating d8 for the c6-knight if necessary to defend f7, e.g. 16.g5 will be met with 16...hxg5 17.♘xg5 ♘d8.

The queen move will be threatening 16.-- 16...exd4 17.cxd4 ♘xe4 18.♘xe4 ♖xe4, because the c6-knight is defended, rendering harmless the typical punishment ♗d5.

The other line is 15...exd4 16.cxd4 ♘b4, continuing “in the style of Jones,” as Nielsen said. It was played shortly after, albeit in a blitz game, Paehtz – Lagno, Riyadh 2017. White reacted poorly with 17.d5?!, and after 17...♘d3 18.♖e2 Black could have obtained a big advantage playing 18...♗xe3! 19.♖xe3 ♘f4.

This line seems a good answer, as 17.♗xf7+ ♔xf7 18.♕b3+ ♘bd5 19.exd5 ♕d7 followed by ...♗b7, or the move order 19...♗b7 20.♕d3 ♕d7 is fine for Black, as the engines indicate.

16.♘f1!



“A very strong move, leaving Black in a strategically very difficult position.” (Nielsen).

Question: Why so much praise for a natural move like this? The knight is just following the Spanish route. It moves to g3 and then f5, as in thousands of games.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: This position is not standard. Note that the knight has left the e4-pawn undefended, but it can’t be taken as 16...exd4 17.cxd4 ♘xe4? loses a piece to 18.d5! ♗xe3 19.♖xe3 ♘e5 20.♘xe5 ♕xe5 21.f3.

16...♘d8

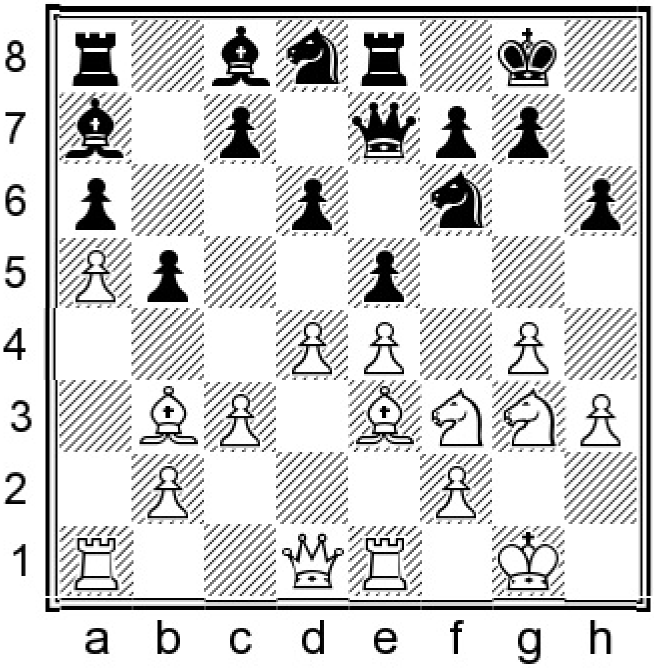
Exercise: What a strange move!

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It was not the first idea, and we could hardly say it was played with pleasure, but what else was there?

With the white knight coming to f5 it is not clever to play 16...♗b7, so Black also has to play in an original way. This move not only overprotects f7, but it has another idea, too.

17.♘g3



Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen react?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

17...c5

This was the second idea. Black wants to neutralize the b3-bishop.

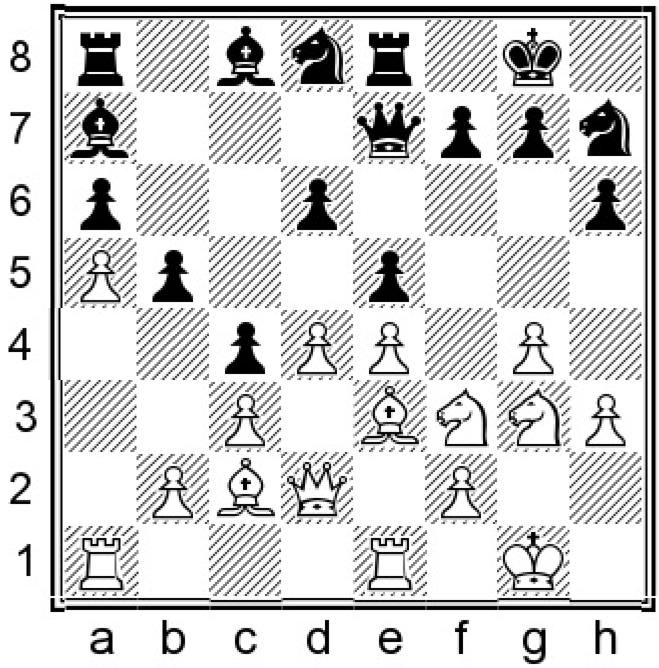
18.♕d2

A good move. The computer suggests the rather surprising 18.♗d5. After 18...♘xd5 19.exd5 the strong white bishop is exchanged, but Black has problems with the coordination of his pieces, so White's position is slightly preferable.

18...c4

"After what I played, he is certainly better, but I felt when I got ...c5, ...c4, there are some plusses to my position. But he has so many tempting options, it is hard to choose from them," said Carlsen. "Chess is a state of mind", remember.

19.♗c2 ♘h7



After this move, Caruana thought for nearly 40 minutes.

“Good things rarely come from such lengthy thought, unless there is something concrete you have to calculate, maybe you need it then,” said Carlsen.

Question: I guess he was very optimistic now, wasn’t he?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Not really. At the board with such tremendous tension, things seldom seem too nice. He explained it thus: “It’s sort of an ambivalent feeling when he starts thinking...You think both ‘It’s great that he’s thinking!’ but also that ‘I did something horribly wrong!’ since it’s probably not something he prepared.”

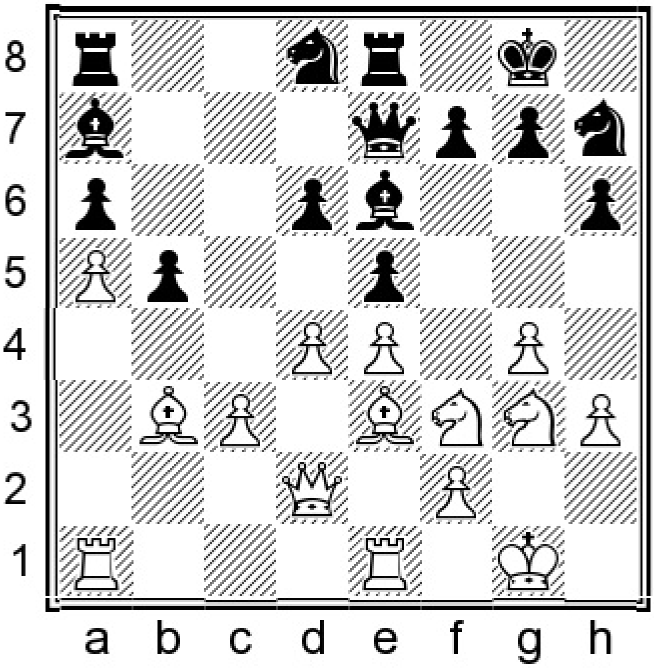
20.b4

There is not much difference between this move and 20.b3. Black must take on b3 to try to get counterplay, otherwise, the only field of battle would be the kingside, where White is better settled.

20...cxb3

Black’s pieces are not well situated to try something effective on the kingside. After 20...♕f6 21.♔g2 ♘e6 White can play 22.h4, controlling g5, because the sacrifice 22...♘xd4 23.cxd4 ♗xg4 is not good enough due to 24.♘h2. However, the computer even prefers 22.♘f5, showing absolutely no respect for Black’s idea.

21.♗xb3 ♗e6



Up until this moment Caruana had played very strongly, and his position is preferable, but from now on events go dramatically wrong.

22.♗c2?

White underestimated his advantage and reorganizes his forces without taking any aggressive action.

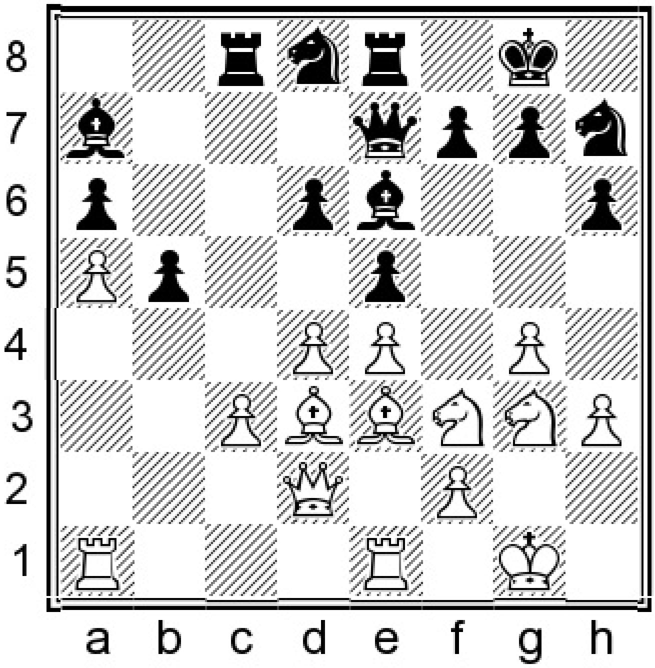
“He must have missed a lot of things,” said Carlsen, and added “I was sure that his plan was 22.♗d5, then I said 22...♖c8 is dangerous, but it’s probably tenable.” This is good for White.

White could also play 22.♘f5!, and after 22...♕f8 (or 22...♕c7), then 23.♗d5. White has all his pieces well posted, while Black’s forces are all uncoordinated. He always has to be on the lookout for the sacrifice ♗xh6, and ...♗xf5 is not a solution, as it opens the g-file for White without gaining counterplay.

22...♖c8

Black’s pieces begin to wake up.

23.♗d3



Exercise: And now what?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

23...♘b7!

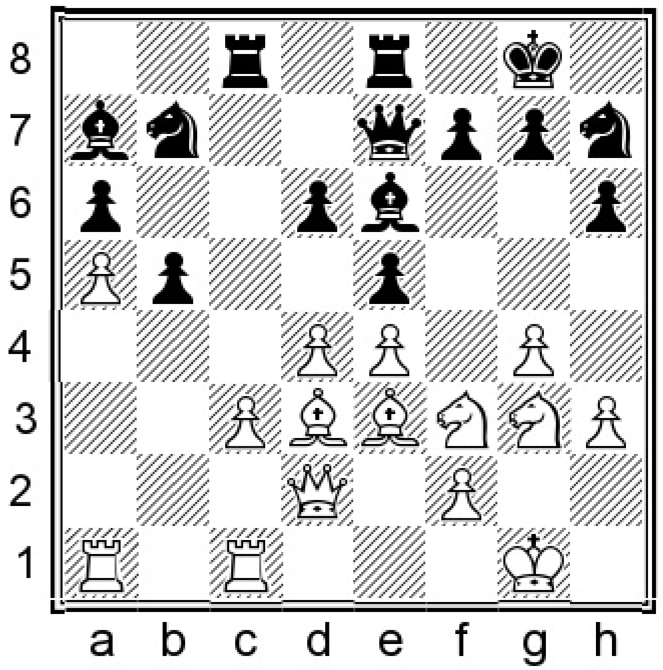
An atypical position where b7 is a good square for the knight in the Ruy Lopez. Here it is not constricted by a white pawn on b4, while it attacks the weak a5-pawn.

The position is still balanced.

24.♖ec1

“Not managing to follow through on his aggressive intentions, Caruana has shifted to a defensive setup keeping a5 and c3 protected, and planning d5 and c4 should Black place his queen on the obvious square c7.” (Nielsen).

White could also play 24.♘f5. If Black attacks the a- and c-pawns with 24...♕c7, then simply 25.♖a3. Then if 25...♘xa5 White has 26.♘xd6, while after 25...♗xf5 26.gxf5 ♘xa5 the move 27.♕a2 is good.



Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

24...♕d8!

An unpleasant move in White’s time trouble. The queen joins the attack on the a5-pawn but far from the influence of the c1-rook.

25.♕b2?!

Now Black is better. White could minimise the damage by playing 25.d5!, although he has to calculate deeply and accurately, something not easy to do in time trouble. After 25...♗xe3 26.♕xe3 ♗d7 White is just in time to play 27.c4!: after 27...♘xa5 28.cxb5 ♖xc1+ 29.♖xc1 axb5 the engines show that 30.♕a7! keeps the balance. Play could continue 30...♘b3, when White recovers the pawn with 31.♖b1 ♘c5 32.♗xb5, and it should be a draw.

Question: Wouldn’t it be rather easy to calculate for top players?

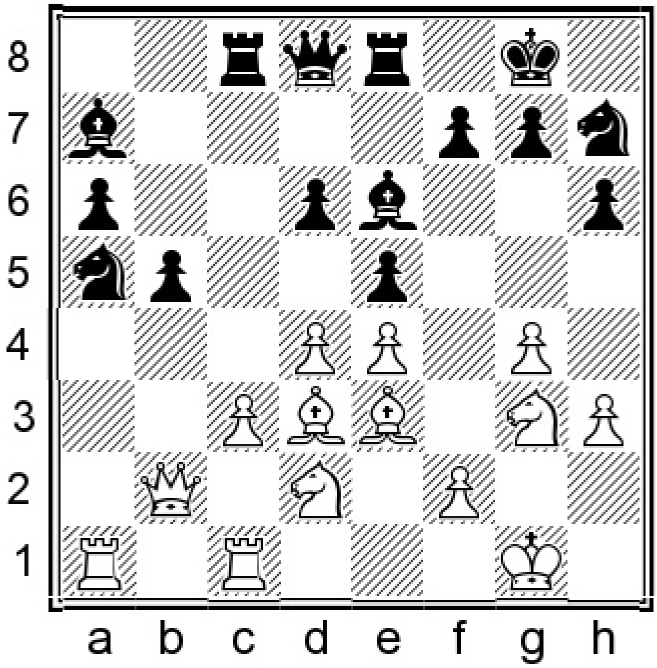
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: In time trouble I am not so sure. It is not a standard position, and these moves are only some of the possibilities to look at.

25...♘xa5

Threatening 26...♘b3.

26.♘d2



White wants to play 27.♕b4 or 27.♕a3.

Exercise: How did Carlsen increase his advantage?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26...d5!

Black is a pawn up, and now the centre is open, so the numerous weaknesses created by the initial offensive are exposed.

26...♘g5 was also interesting.

27.♖e1

Passive, but there is nothing better: 27.exd5 ♗xd5 and 27.dxe5 ♗xe3 are worse.

27...♗b8!

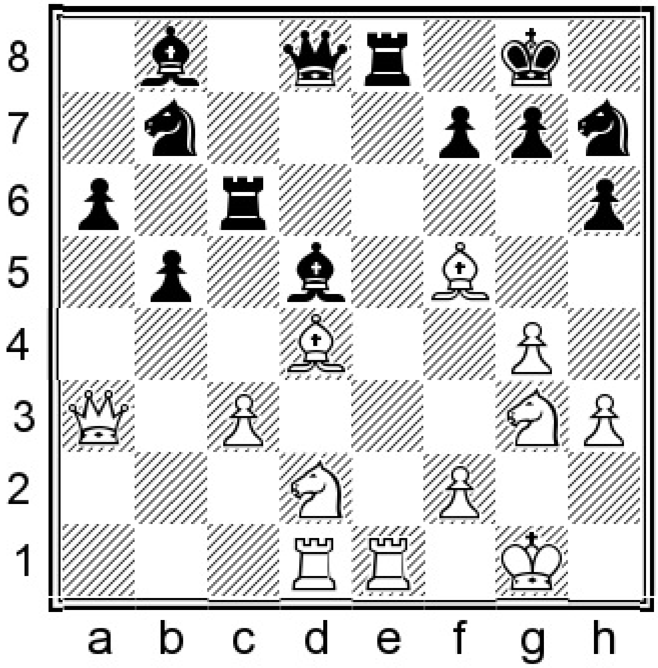
There are several good moves. Carlsen chose the one that was most consistent with the previous move. The bishop has nothing more to do on a7, so now it uses a diagonal which will be open, aiming at the kingside.

28.exd5 ♗xd5 29.♗f5 ♖c6

29...exd4 was good, but this is equally strong.

30.♕a3 ♘b7 31.♖ad1 exd4 32.♗xd4

If 32.cxd4 Black will improve the position of his h7-knight playing 32...♘f6 or 32...♘f8 before taking further action.



Exercise (easy): Black has a winning advantage, so how did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

32...♘g5!

Now it is Black who takes the initiative on the kingside. The white king is very weak.

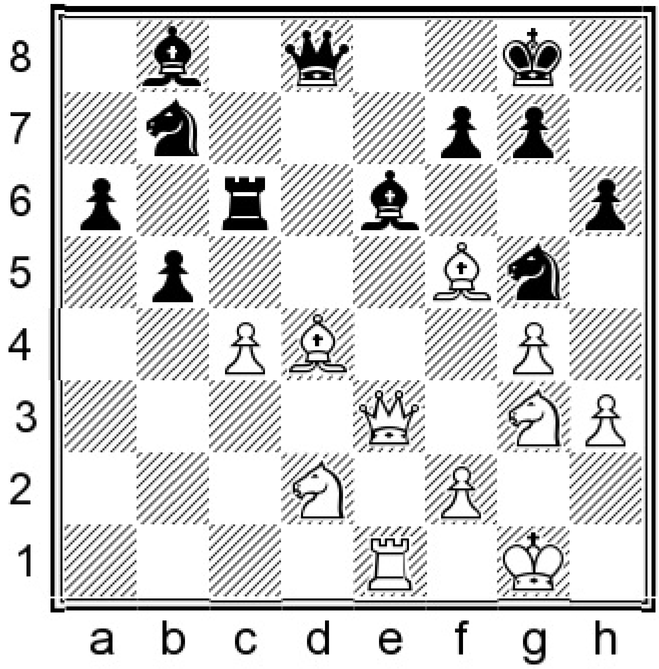
33.c4

33.♔h2 ♗f4 and 33.♖xe8+ ♕xe8 34.♔h2 ♕e2 are no better.

33...♖xe1+ 34.♖xe1 ♗e6

Attacking the d4-bishop and renewing the threat on h3.

35.♕e3



Exercise: How did Carlsen finish off the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

35...♗f4!

36.♕xf4 loses to 36...♘xh3+ and 36.♕e2 loses to 36...♗xd2 37.♕xd2 ♘f3+.

0–1

In the penultimate round of the tournament Carlsen gave up his unusual openings used in early rounds. Despite that, he incurred problems in the first phase of this game. Caruana was better prepared in the opening and gained the advantage.

They reached a complex position with many interesting options, but Caruana began to play poorly and his advantage disappeared.

"It started to go down very quickly for him, all my moves came very easily and he seems to lose the trend quickly," said Carlsen.

With his win, Carlsen was rewarded with a half point lead before the last round. He then agreed a draw with Nakamura in that last game, which was enough to finish clear first in the tournament.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Even in dubious or bad positions there are chances to fight, as Lasker demonstrated. (16...♘d8! *25.d5!*).

2.) “Chess is a state of mind”. Objectively, Black still had a worse position after 18...c4, but Carlsen felt confident. Maybe that influenced the bad choices Caruana made in the next phase. (22.♗c2? 25.♕b2?).

3.) It’s important to train to detect the critical moments of the game, when the value of each move is higher than normal. (16...♘d8! *22.♘f5!* 24...♕d8!).

4.) Always be on the alert for tactical motifs. (16.♘f1! 25.♕b2? 26...d5! 35...♗f4!).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Show in Text Mode

Game 21

Levon Aronian – Magnus Carlsen

Queen's Pawn [A43]

London Classic (9), 11.12.2017

1.d4 e6 2.♘f3 c5

Not the Stonewall this time.

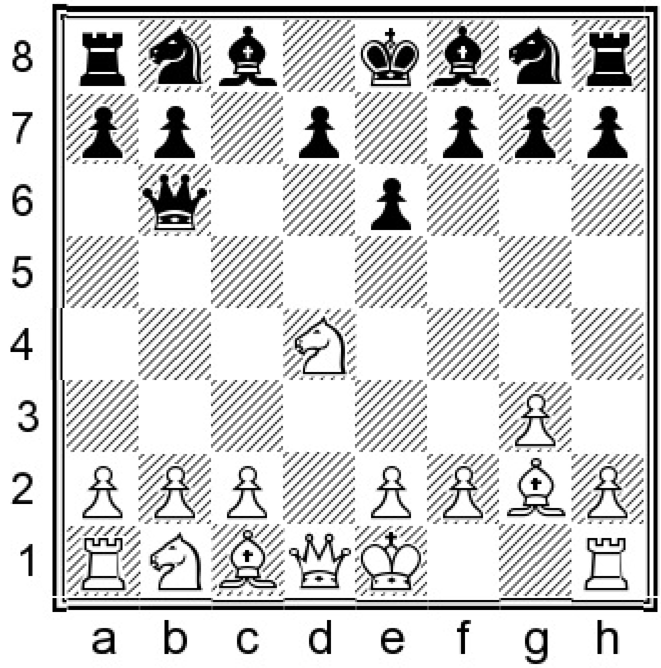
3.g3

On his part, Aronian avoids switching to a Sicilian Defence with 3.e4.

3...cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♕b6

An idea of Bent Larsen; 4...♘f6 is more usual. It may transpose into the Sicilian Defence after 5.♗g2 a6 6.0-0 ♕c7 7.e4. It is also possible to arrive at a Grunfeld Defence with reversed colours after 4...d5 5.♗g2 ♘f6 6.0-0 e5 7.♘b3

5.♗g2



5...♗c5

The point: Black forces a concession, as the knight can't withdraw due to 6...♗xf2+.

Question: But, is it worthwhile?

Show/Hide Solution

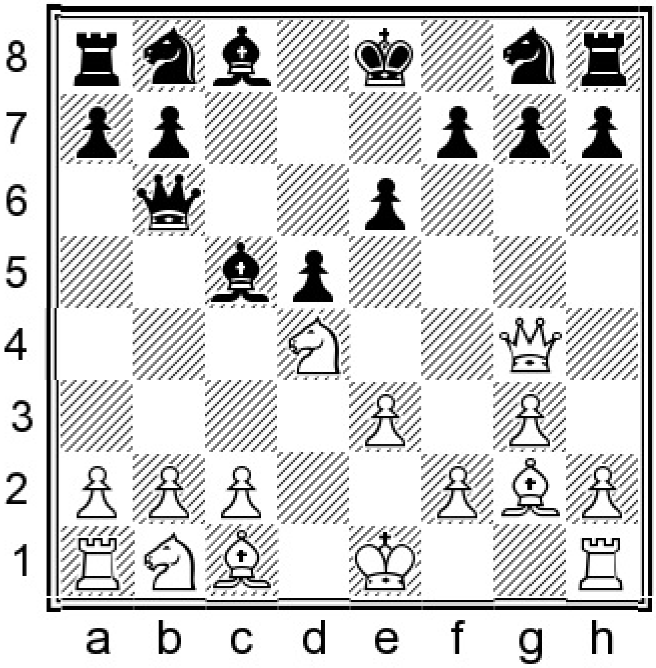
Answer: We will see later how important this is after 6.e3, with the c1-h6 diagonal closed.

6.e3 d5

Larsen played 6...♘c6 against Pomar in Palma de Mallorca 1968, but he criticised it because he didn't like the continuation of the game: 7.♘b3 ♗e7 8.e4! ♘f6 9.0-0 0-0 10.♗e3 ♕c7. Here White played 11.c4, which is fine. White could also play 11.f4 or 11.♘c3 with a good position. Larsen won the game anyway.

6...d5 was the move recommended by Larsen.

7.♕g4



White makes use of the positive side of the move 6.e3, and tries to exploit the absence of the kingside bishop as well as the fact that the g8-knight is still undeveloped.

Exercise: How did Carlsen respond to the attack?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

7...♗f8!

Carlsen avoids 7...g6, weakening the dark squares. The tempo loss will be partly recovered by playing ...♘f6 next.

In some way this is a Laskerian move. We recall that in the MacCutcheon Variation of the French, after the moves

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♗g5 ♗b4 5.e5 h6 6.♗d2 ♗xc3 7.bxc3 ♘e4 8.♕g4, instead of 8...g6 he recommended 8...♔f8, even losing the right to castle, but refusing to weaken the pawn structure.

8.0-0 ♘f6 9.♕e2 e5

A previous game saw 9...♗d7, covering b5, but Carlsen saw no reason not to play this logical move, occupying the centre.

10.♕b5+!

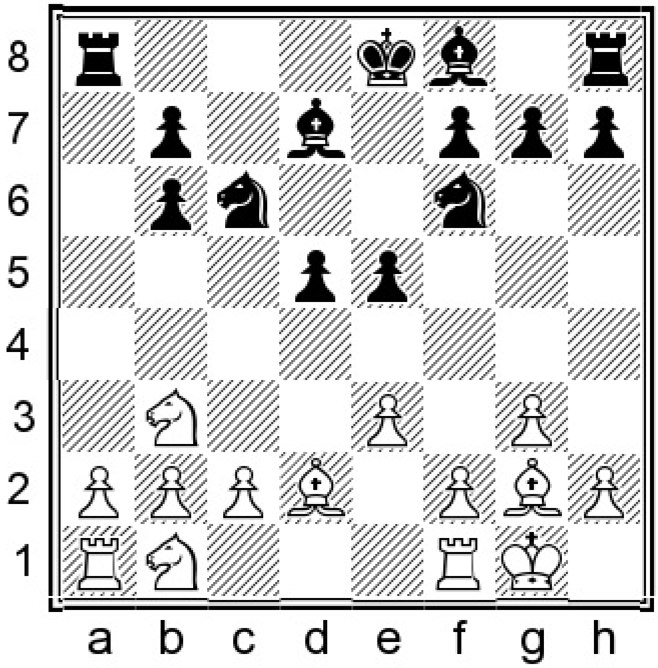
A good decision. White enters an endgame where Black's centre is not as strong as in the middlegame.

The routine retreat 10.♘b3 would allow Black to solidify his centre. Play could continue 10...♘c6 11.♘c3 ♗g4 12.f3 ♗e6 or 10...♗g4 11.f3 ♗d7 12.♘c3 ♗b4, threatening 13...♗xc3 followed by ...♗b5.

Here comes the explanation of the importance of forcing 6.e3. In these lines we see that White is deprived of the usual move ♗g5, attacking the black centre.

10...♗d7 11.♕xb6 axb6 12.♘b3 ♘c6 13.♗d2

The right move order, not 13.♘c3?! ♘b4.



Exercise: What would you play here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

13...♗d6?

A natural developing move, but a weak one, as Aronian will show.

Here 13...♘b4 will be met with 14.♗xb4 ♗xb4 15.a3 ♗e7 16.♘c3 ♗e6, when White will attack the centre with 17.♖fd1! (better than 17.♖ad1 ♖c8, with the idea of 18...♗xa3), and if now 17...♖c8?! then 18.♘xd5 ♖xc2 19.♖ac1.

But Black could give the d5 pawn some extra protection with 13...♗e6, and after 14.♘c3 he can play 14...0-0-0 or even the AlphaZero-type move 14...h5.

14.♘c3 ♘e7

This was the idea. Black defends d5, preventing ♘b5, and everything seems fine, but...

15.a4!

Now ♘b5 cannot be prevented. Carlsen was highly critical of his own idea: “I went terribly astray very quickly,” he said, and added, “13...♗d6 was just absolutely awful. I missed his plan with ♘c3 and a4. Then it just really stinks.”

15...0-0

Black accepts a rather unpleasant position, as there is nothing better.

Black has no active pieces to counter-attack. After e.g. 15...♖c8 White would continue 16.♘b5 anyway. If 16...♗xb5 17.axb5 ♖xc2 then 18.♗c3 0-0 19.♗f3-d1 follows, and the black rook is trapped.

16.♘b5 ♗xb5

Forced. 16...♗b8 would be strongly met with 17.♗b4 ♖e8 18.♗xe7! ♖xe7 19.c4 (or 19.♘d2, planning c4) 19...dxc4 20.♘d2 and White is pressing.

17.axb5 ♖ac8 18.♗c3

Carlsen ended up with a weak centre and a passive position.

18...h5

The move liked by Larsen, AlphaZero... and Carlsen

19.♖fd1 ♖fd8 20.♘d2!

Aronian improves the prospects of his worst piece.

Here and on the next move, inserting ♖a7 was surely considered by Aronian.

20...h4 21.♘f3 hxg3 22.hxg3 e4

Question: Why cede so many squares?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen most probably didn’t like it either, but again, it was nearly forced. 22...♘g6 didn’t attract the world champion as it was too passive; he prefers to complicate the game, although, of course, he was aware that his move weakens the dark squares.

23.♘g5

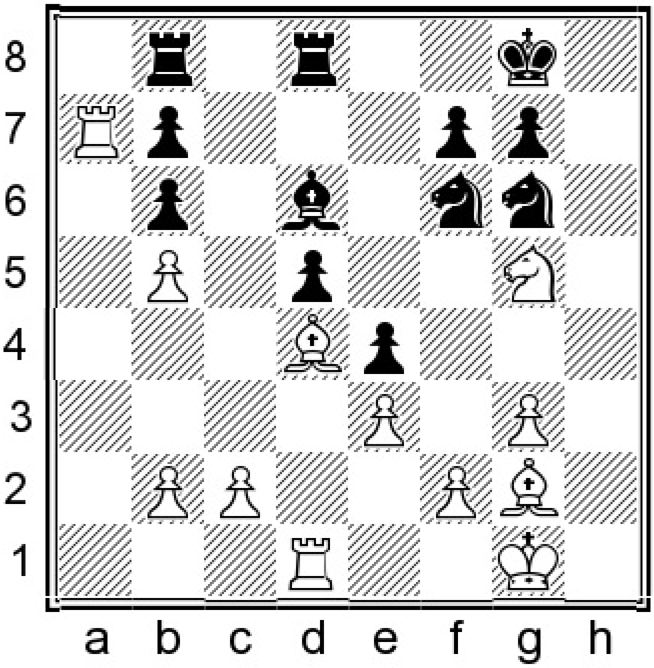
An original decision by Aronian, exploiting the square ceded by the move ...h5.

He wants more than what the obvious 23.♘d4 offers. The game would probably continue 23...♗e5 (this looks better than 23...♘g6? 24.♘f5 or 23...♖a8 24.♖xa8 (24.♗h3 also puts pressure on the black position) 24...♖xa8 25.♘e2 followed by ♘f4). This would nevertheless be pleasant to play for White.

23...♘g6 24.♖a7 ♖b8

Or 24...♖c7 25.♖d2 with the idea of 26.♗d4.

25.♗d4



The white pieces are dominant. Carlsen must find defensive resources.

Exercise: What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

25...♗c5!

Active defence! 25...♘d7 was also possible, but instead of this passive defence “Magnus sacrifices a pawn, aiming for some positional compensation.” (Nielsen).

After 25...♗c7 White has a pleasant choice between 26.c4! and 26.♗f1! followed by c4. Both would leave Black with very little chance of active play.

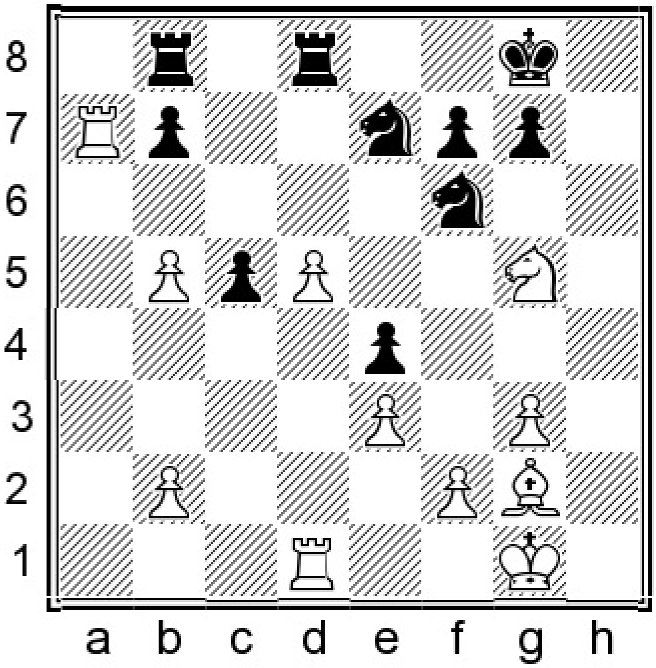
26.♗xc5

The alternative was 26.c4, e.g. 26...dxc4 27.♘xe4 ♘xe4 28.♗xe4 ♗xd4 29.♖xd4 ♖xd4 30.exd4, which was also very pleasant for White.

26...bxc5 27.c4! ♘e7

White wins a pawn, because 27...dxc4? 28.♖xd8+ ♖xd8 29.♖xb7 is losing. White’s b-pawn is too strong.

28.cxd5



Exercise: What did Carlsen play here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

28...♘c8!

This was the strong defensive idea. The knight wants to move to d6.

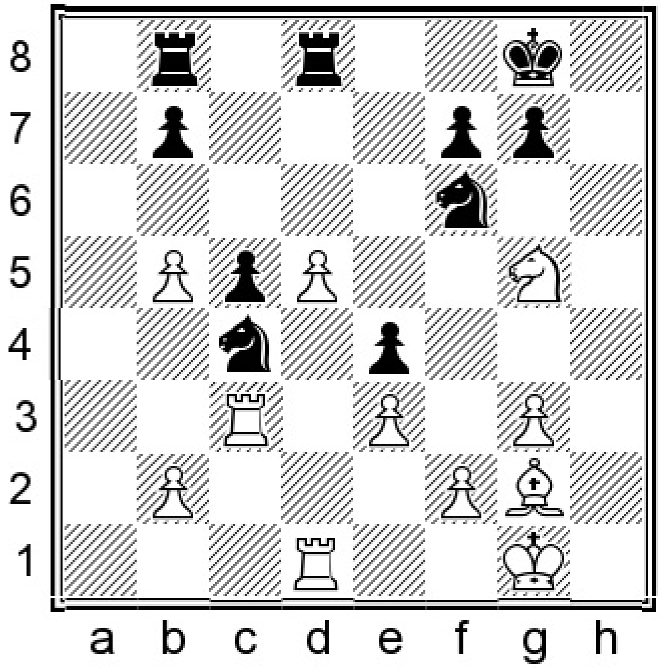
28...♘exd5? 29.♘xe4 would be lost for Black.

29.♖a4!

Aronian forces Black's knight to change his destiny, as 29...♘d6? fails to 30.♗xe4.

This is stronger than 29.♖aa1 ♘d6 30.♖ac1 b6, which looks solid for Black.

29...♘b6 30.♖a3 ♘c4 31.♖c3



Exercise: What did Carlsen play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

31...♘d6!

Sacrificing another pawn in the best conditions, so Carlsen gets what he wanted: his knights are optimally placed.

It would have been worse to open up the game without gaining material with 31...♘xb2 32.♖d2 ♘a4? (32...♘xd5 33.♖xc5 ♘d3 34.♖c4 f5 35.g4 is also better for White) 33.♖c4 ♘b6 34.♖xc5 when White is a pawn up and has serious winning chances.

32.♖xc5 ♖a8

Black is two pawns down and he is worse, but he has practical chances to save the game, as his rook is ready to attack the b-pawns, e.g. 33.b6 would be met with 33...♖a6.

33.♗h3

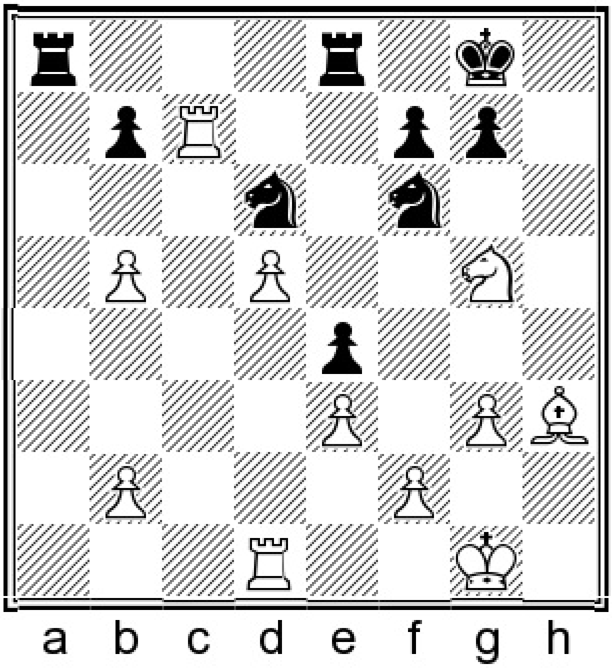
“I thought I had to deliver the decisive blow at once,” said Aronian. Instead of securing his position and trusting in his material advantage, he believed in his tactical chances to increase his advantage.

33.♗f1! overprotecting b5 and maybe to play b6 later looks promising.

33...♖e8

A new step forward. White must contend with 34....♖e5.

34.♖c7



Exercise: How did Carlsen respond?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

34...♔f8!

Black cannot accept the offer. If 34...♖e5? then 35.♘xf7! ♘xf7 36.♗e6 ♖xe6 37.dxe6 ♘e5 38.♖xb7 and White wins with his two passed pawns.

35.b6?

It was not too late to play 35.♗f1! with some advantage, but Aronian still thought he had a nearly winning position, so he only looked for active solutions.

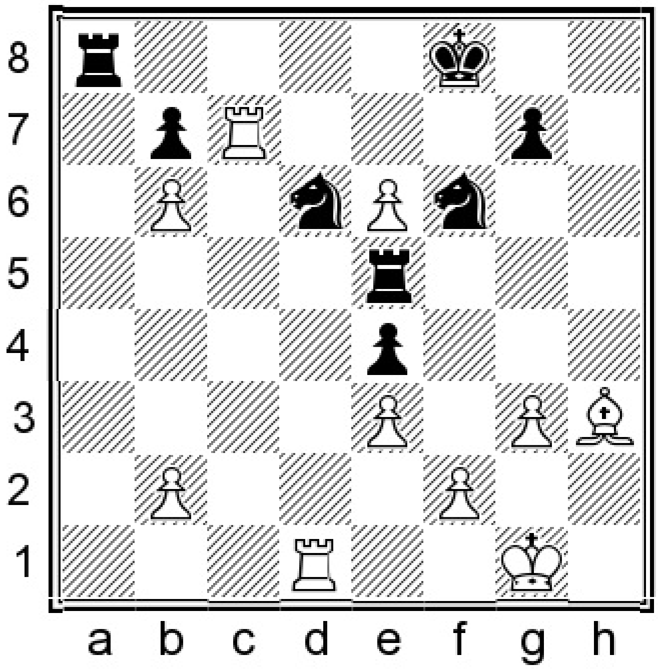
35...♖e5 36.♘e6+

This was the idea.

White rejected 36.♘xf7 ♘xf7 37.♖xb7 ♖xd5 38.♖xd5 ♘xd5 39.♗e6 ♘d8 40.♗xd5 ♘xb7 41.♗xb7 ♖b8 42.♗xe4 ♖xb6, with a drawn ending.

36...fxe6 37.dxe6

37.♗xe6 contains no threats. Black could play 37...♖a5 among other good alternatives.



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

37...♘fe8!

This move took Aronian by surprise. He said: “for some reason I believed he had to play 37...♖d8,” then 38.♔g2 would leave Black almost in zugzwang.

38.♖d7 ♖aa5!

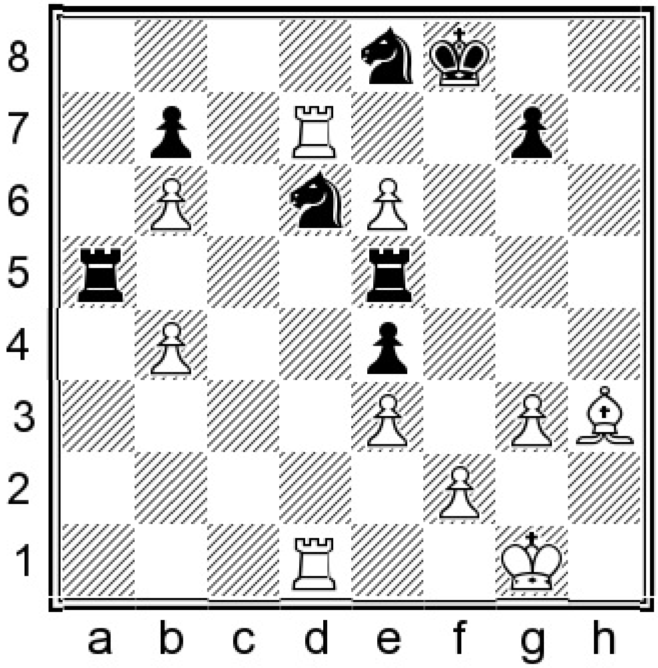
“I blundered 38...♖aa5, I have to make a draw, but I blundered a couple of moves and then...I don’t know what happened to me,” said Aronian.

White realised only when it was too late that he could be worse in the endgame.

39.b4?

“A really unpractical decision not to take on d6. Embarrassing.” (Aronian).

It was not too late to return to the drawing path with 39.♖1xd6 ♘xd6 40.♖xd6 ♖ad5 41.♖xd5 ♖xd5 42.e7+ ♔xe7 43.♗c8. Aronian also mentioned the move order 39.e7+ followed by ♖xd6.



Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen gain a great advantage?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

39...♖ad5!

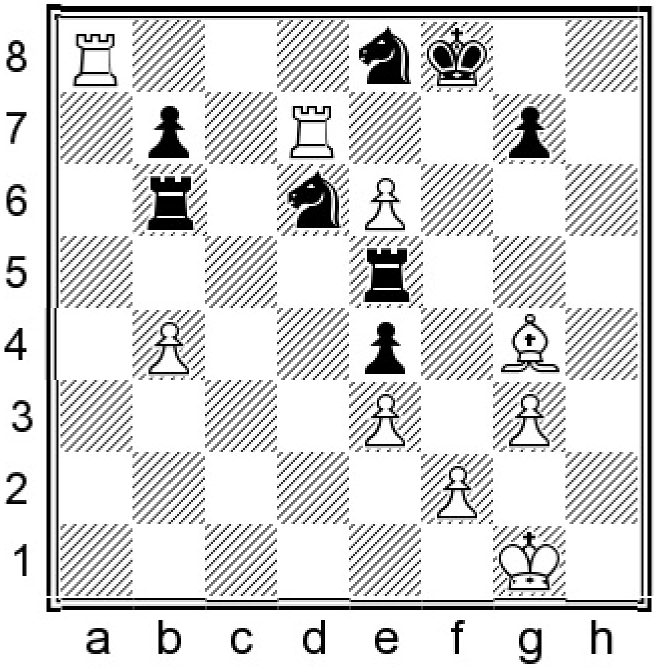
Protecting the d6–knight, and suddenly Black is a piece up parrying White's threats at the same time.

40.♖a1 ♖b5

It's time to capture the weak pawns. White's initiative is not going anywhere.

41.♖a8 ♖xb6 42.♗g4

At this point, in an already lost position, Aronian offered a draw, which would have been enough for Carlsen to win the tournament.



Exercise: How did Carlsen improve his position even more?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

42...♖d5!

Rejecting the draw, and overprotecting the d6–knight to take the b4–pawn, but not yet 42...♖xb4? 43.♖xd6.

43.♔g2 ♖xb4 44.♖a1 ♖bb5 45.♗e2

White is lost, as the bishop cannot join the attack or strengthen the e-pawn.

45...♖b2 46.♗g4 ♖dd2

White still tried some tricks, but it is over.

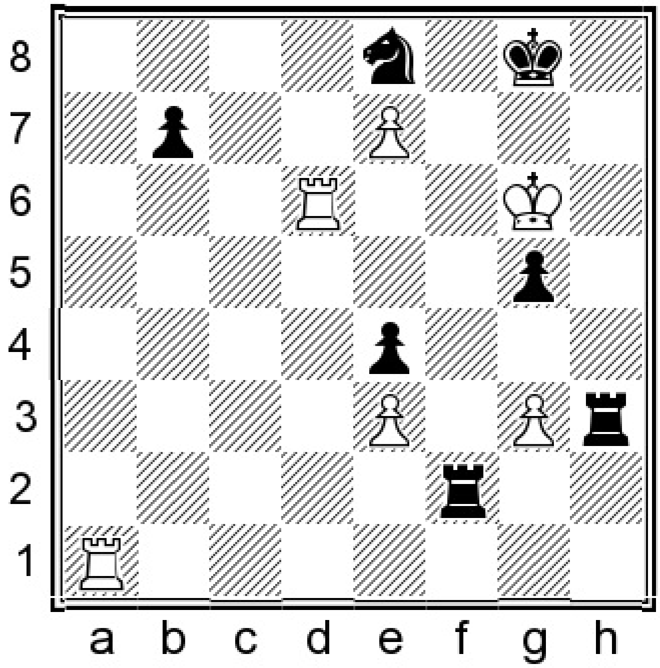
47.♔h3 ♖xf2 48.♔h4 ♖h2+ 49.♗h3

49.♔g5 provokes mate after 49...♖b5+ 50.♔g6 ♖h6#

49...g5+ 50.♔h5

Or 50.♔g4 ♘f6+.

50...♖xh3+ 51.♔g6 ♖f2 52.e7+ ♔g8 53.♖xd6



Exercise: The rook is taboo, but Black is still a piece up, so how did Carlsen finish off the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

53...♖h7!

The white king will get mated after 54.♖d8 ♖f6+ 55.♔xg5 ♖g7+ 56.♔h5 ♔h7

0–1

This game was from the last round of the London tournament, which was the last tournament of the 2017 Grand Chess Tour.

“Not Magnus’s best game or his best tournament, but it got the job done when it mattered!” was Nielsen’s recap of the game. Carlsen won the Grand Chess Tour.

Carlsen said: “Frankly I thought before the game that I needed to win. I didn’t check the standings, but I just assumed I needed to win. Then I found out right before the game that it wasn’t really so, but that didn’t really change my mindset; I wanted to get a game. And he also was happy to get a game.”

After Vachier-Lagrave drew his game quickly, Carlsen only needed to draw to win the Grand Chess Tour, but a draw was not easy to get in the first part of the game, as he had a bad position.

Aronian couldn’t find a win, then overlooked a strong defensive move by his opponent, giving the advantage to Carlsen, who even rejected a draw offer and went on to win.

“He was probably incredibly frustrated that he wasn’t winning, so he decided not to take the draw when he should have. That was my good fortune in this game,” said Carlsen.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) You must evaluate what is preferable, a tempo loss or slightly weakening the position. There is no fixed rule. (*7...g6?* 7...♗f8!).

2.) In a worse or an unpleasant position, you must be aware of the dangers, play carefully, and at the same time try to grab any chance to gain counterplay. (28...♘c8! 31...♘d6! 37...♘fe8! 38...♖aa5! 39...♖ad5!).

3.) When to remain flexible, and when to take concrete action? The answer is “it depends...” – there’s no ‘one-size-fits-all’ answer. (*33.♗f1!* 35.b6? *35.♗f1!*).

4.) Self-confidence is essential, but this can easily be carried too far. Never underestimate your opponent’s defensive resources, even in difficult situations.

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

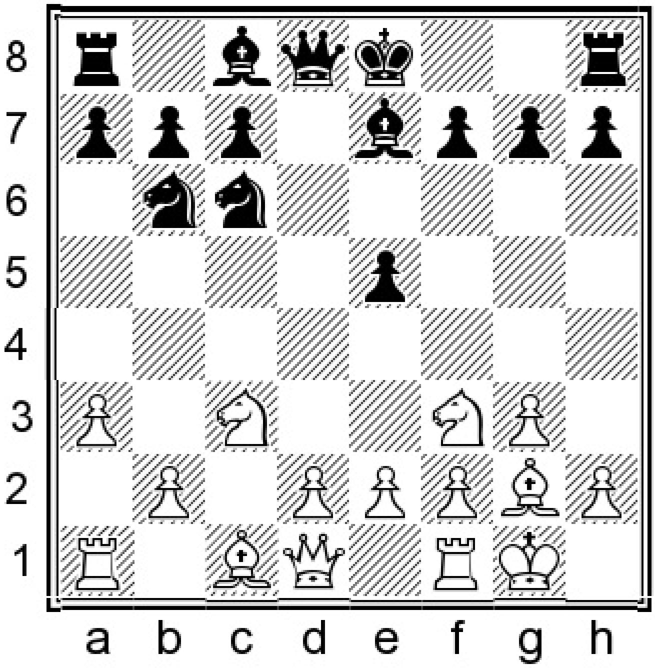
Game 22

Anish Giri – Magnus Carlsen

English Opening [A29]

Gashimov Memorial, Shamkir (8), 27.04.2018

1.c4 e5 2.♘c3 ♘f6 3.♘f3 ♘c6 4.g3 d5 5.cxd5 ♘xd5 6.♗g2 ♘b6 7.0-0 ♗e7 8.a3



8...a5

Question: This is not the main move, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: You are right. 8...0-0 9.b4 is far more usual.

Kasparov wrote back in 2004: “Nowadays this is considered to be weakening.” However, much can change and Carlsen and his team naturally had new ideas to show.

9.d3 0-0 10.♗e3

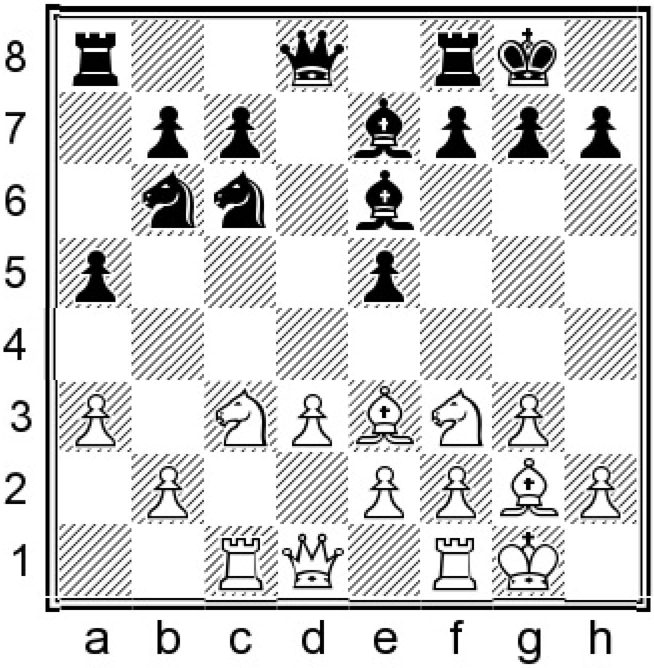
White not only controls c5, but also in some lines the exchange ♗xb6 may be considered. It would weaken Black’s pawn structure and virtually obtain a pawn advantage, though of course the bishop may be missed.

10...♗e6 11.♖c1

White plays the most popular move, occupying the half-open file.

11.♘a4 is less frequently seen. Giri called it “less ambitious,” although it was played in one of the most beautiful games of the previous century, Botvinnik – Portisch, Monte Carlo 1968. Instead of the game continuation, 11...♘xa4 12.♕xa4 ♗d5 13.♖fc1, which favoured White’s development, 11...♘d5 was suggested.

11.♗xb6 cxb6 12.♘d2 has been played on a few occasions, but without success.



Exercise: What do you think Carlsen played here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

11...a4

This pawn sacrifice, preventing 12.♘a4, is one of the reasons for the revival of 8...a5. Black has several options here, but the most usual one is 11...f5.

12.♘d2

The immediate 12.♗xb6 cxb6 13.♘xa4 gives Black good compensation for the pawn after 13...e4. Then 14.♘d2 could be met simply by 14...exd3, or the more complex 14...♗g5, while if 14.♘e1, then 14...♗g5!, taking advantage of the absence of the e3-bishop, e.g. 15.♖a1 exd3 16.♘xd3 ♘d4.

12...f5

Black wants to play ...f4 at some moment and insists on the pawn sacrifice, still following the key game Aronian – Nepomniachtchi, Geneva 2017.

This is more ambitious than 12...♘d5, which is also fine for Black. White would probably exchange knights on d5, because even though White can take the pawn, it is probably not the best option. The immediate 13.♘xa4? is bad due to 13...♘xe3 14.fxe3 ♗g5!, while if 13.♗xd5 ♗xd5 14.♘xa4 ♘d4 15.♘c3 then 15...♗e6 gives Black enough compensation.

13.♗xb6 cxb6 14.♘xa4

Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14...♗g5

Immediately occupying the dark squares that White has abandoned. He threatens 15...♗xd2, winning a piece, and White can't close the diagonal with 15.e3 because 15...f4! follows.

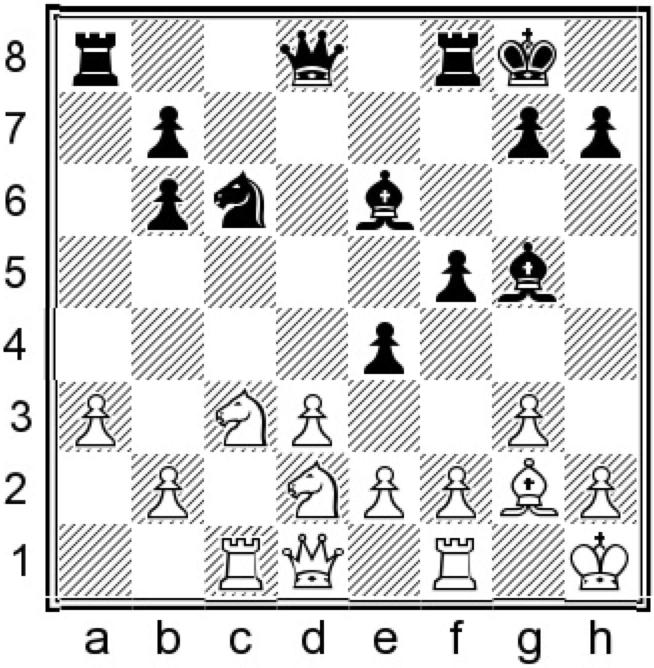
15.♘c3 e4

This is also a logical move that we already saw in a similar position.

16.♔h1!

Giri explained that he wanted to keep the option of ♖c2, which will follow in case of 16...♘e5. Aronian – Nepomniachtchi continued 16.♖b1 ♘e5 17.♘b3 ♘g4, and White played 18.♕c2 allowing

18...♗e3! with a complicated game. Instead of 18.♕c2 Giri mentioned that White could have improved with 18.h3! "when Black will sacrifice his knight one way or another, but only analysis will tell if it works."



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16...♕d7

Played very quickly. Carlsen was obviously still in his preparation and he said after the game that he liked the position and the initiative that he got for the pawn. He added that the majority of players will prefer to have the initiative here, rather than the pawn.

Going back, after 16.♖b1, instead of 16...♘e5, 16...♕d7 "was clearly the improvement of team Carlsen," said Giri, and added "White is rather cramped, and although he is by no means worse yet, being unprepared I would definitely not have enjoyed this very much." Something similar could be said after what was played here, because he didn't expect Carlsen's move.

17.♖b1?

Giri unpins the rook, but it is "The wrong moment to speed up. Now that Black has mobilized fully, I will be too late to generate any play and will face a very unpleasant task." (Giri).

"Chess is a state of mind": instead of the poor reaction, had he been more optimistic, Giri would have noticed the strong engine suggestion 17.g4! at the board. That "was the remarkable point behind my move," joked Giri, because of course he hadn't considered it when making his previous move. So in respect of his 16th move he said: "my move 16.♔h1 is very sensible, but not for the reasons I thought."

After 17.g4 he mentioned 17...exd3 18.f4 ♗f6, where both 19.g5 and 19.gxf5 "lead to an unclear but roughly balanced position." (Giri).

So Black now continues with his development without worries and the evaluation 16.♔h1! is converted into 16.♔h1?!.

17...♖ad8 18.♘c4

18.f4 was recommended. It is possible, but Giri said he didn't see how to continue after 18...♗f6.

Exercise: How did Carlsen answer the attack on the b6-pawn?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

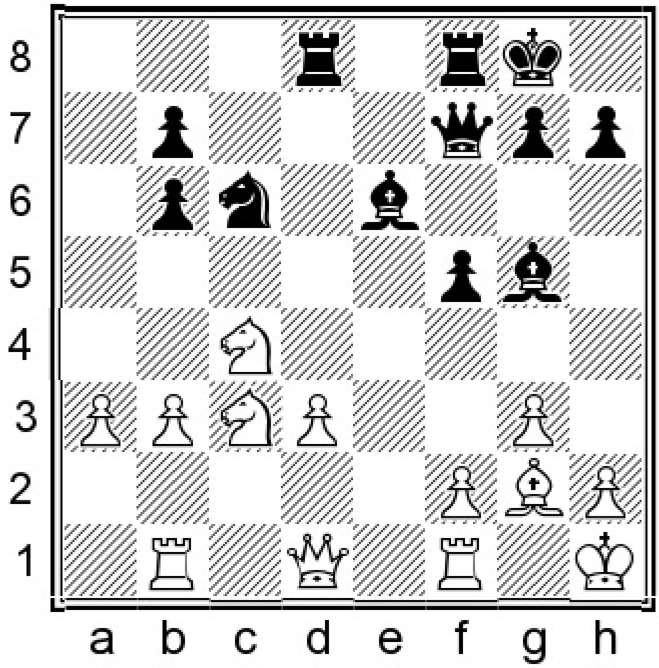
18...♕f7!

Now 19.♘xb6? is bad due to 19...♗b3 20.♕e1 exd3. White cannot recapture on d3, as 21.exd3? ♖fe8 22.♘e2 ♖xd3 wins for Black.

19.b3

"A sad move, but the planned 19.♕a4 did not look good either. The queen would be too far from the kingside after 19...exd3 20.exd3," said Giri. Black could play 20...♖xd3, but 20...f4! looks even stronger.

19...exd3 20.exd3



Exercise: How did Carlsen increase the tension in the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20...f4!

Ceding e4, but that is not the only factor in the position.

“Now it is clear that with all the dark squares in his control, Black has a serious advantage.” (Giri).

21.♘e4 ♗e7

Naturally, Black wants to keep this bishop. Giri mentioned 21...♗h6 as also interesting, but what Carlsen played is more “human”. e7 looks like a more flexible square than h6, and it also covers d6.

22.gxf4

A less than ideal solution against the threatened 22...f3, but now the dark squares are weaker.

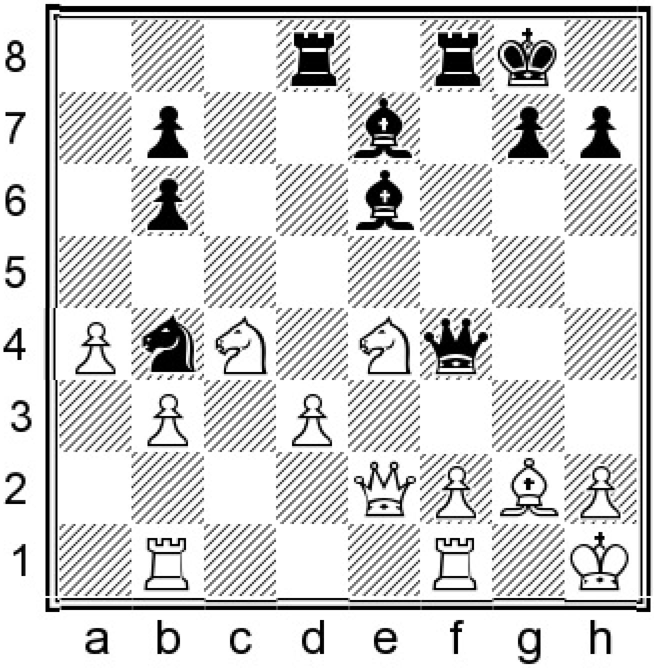
22...♕xf4 23.a4

Preventing 23...b5 followed by ...♘e5, but it is not played for free.

23...♘b4

This is the price. The knight threatens d3 and may go to d5 and possibly f4.

24.♕e2



At first Giri thought Black's last move was a bit inaccurate, since now Black can't take the d3–pawn comfortably, and the black bishops are somewhat hanging on the e-file.

Exercise: Carlsen showed he had played that well. How did he continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

24...♕h6!

"Very elegant and strong." (Giri). With this manoeuvre, the e6-bishop is protected and f4 is free for other pieces.

25.♖bd1

25.♕e3 was suggested by Magnus, believing that the ending was tenable for White. Giri initially thought that it was extremely bad for White, but then he agreed with the world champion, but instead of exchanging queens, 25...♖f4! is strong.

25.d4, returning the pawn, was proposed by Giri. After 25...♖xd4?! White gains some space playing 26.f4!, because 26...♖xf4? is wrong due to 27.♖xf4 ♕xf4 28.♘g5!

Black would probably prefer 25...♘d5 26.♖be1 ♘f4 27.♕e3, "intending ♗f3 and ♘e5, with an ugly but defensible position." (Giri).

25...♘d5 26.♖g1 ♔h8

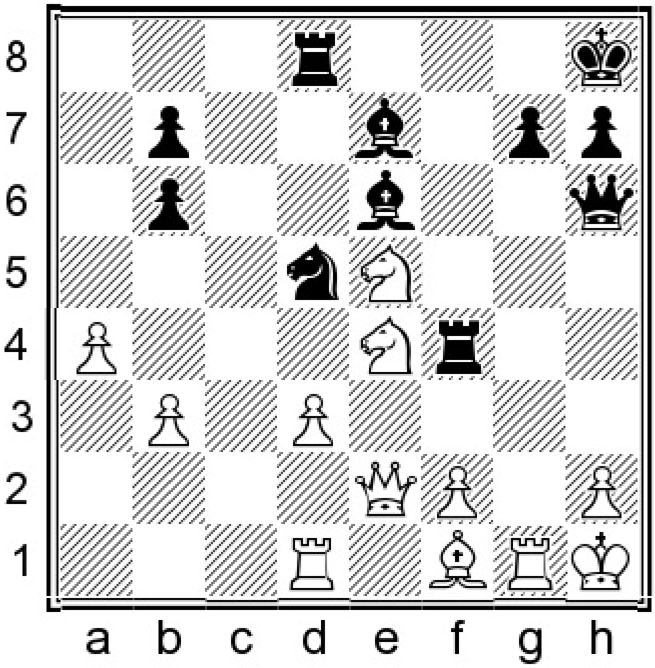
A good move, better than 26...♘f4, which helps the defence. It would be met by 27.♕e3. However, the immediate 26...♖f4! was stronger.

27.♗f1

The defence is difficult to handle. Black is better after 27.♗f3 ♘f4 28.♕e3 ♘h3, while 27.d4 ♖f4 28.f3 ♖h4 29.♗f1 is also sad, but this was probably the best option.

27...♖f4 28.♘e5?!

28.f3 ♖h4 29.d4 transposes to the previous note.



28...♖df8?

The world champion played a natural move, but not the best one.

Exercise: You have the chance to play a stronger move than him. Which one is it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen missed the manoeuvre 28...♖h4! 29.f3 ♘e3 30.♖d2 ♘f5, which threatens the b3-pawn and would prevent White from playing d4 and gaining control of this key dark square. White’s position is too passive. Giri even said “Black is winning here.”

29.f3 ♖h4 30.d4

“Now I had suddenly kind of consolidated my still rather sad position.” (Giri).

30...♘f4

Black is still slightly better and has several moves at his disposal, but none of them is clearly stronger. 30...♘e3 31.♖d3 is unconvincing, while if 30...♗f5 White has 31.♘g5!, as 31...♗xg5?? even loses to 32.♘f7+.

Maybe the computer suggestion 30...♗g8 is the best, but not an easy move to make at the board, as it looks too passive.

So Carlsen decided to recover the pawn. If now 31.♕b2 Black can take on b3 anyway.

31.♕d2 ♗xb3

Black’s advantage is almost gone, but in this phase time trouble begins to affect the game.

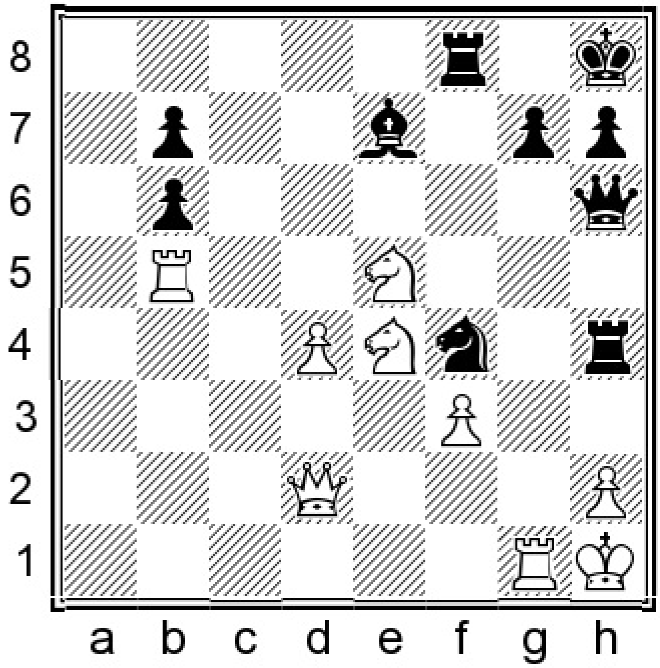
32.♖b1?

32.♖c1! was much better, intending 33.♖c7, which would be very strong after 32...♗xa4? (33.♖c7).

32...♗xa4 33.♗b5

Better than 33.♗c4 ♗e8.

33...♗xb5 34.♖xb5



“I thought this position was completely defensible, and it probably was, but it was too early to relax.” (Giri).

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue to create practical problems for White?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

34...♕e6!

Preventing 35.d5.

35.♕b2

Attacking b6 and eyeing the g7–pawn. This is a “human” move, while the engines also mention the passive but more solid 35.♖b2.

35...♗d8

A natural move six moves before time control.

It was possible to play 35...♖a8, because 36.♖xb6? loses to 36...♖a2!, but White would play 36.d5!, opening the long dark diagonal and complicating the game.

36.♘g5?

Here Giri saw the strong 36.d5!, when after 36...♘xd5 37.♘g5 ♗xg5 38.♖xg5 ♖d8 39.♕d2 Black faces serious practical problems in trying to convert his advantage.

However, while calculating these lines (there are several possibilities for both sides, and accuracy is essential), “I suddenly started wondering why I should give away the pawn first, but this logic was very flawed,” said Giri, explaining his mistake.

36...♕e8!

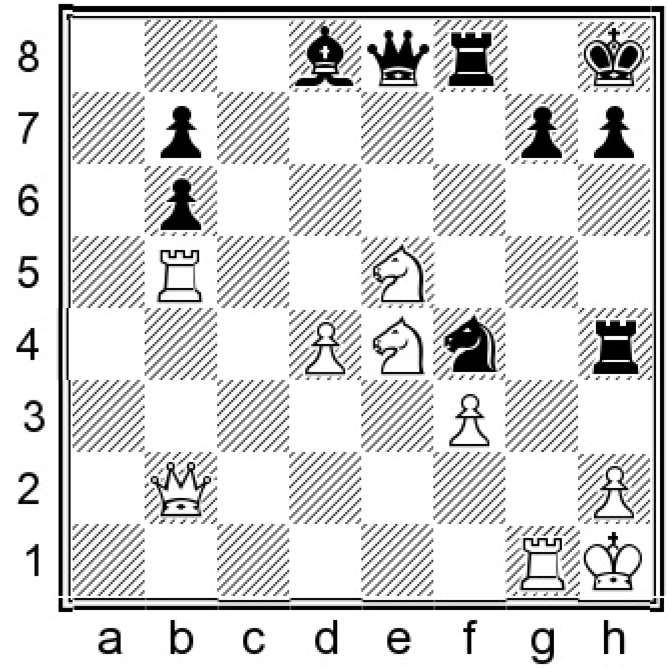
Now he is not forced to play 36...♗xg5.

37.♖b3

37.d5? is answered by 37...♖h5! 38.♘e6 ♗f6, winning material.

Exercise (easy): Show one of the virtues of 36...♕e8. What would you play after 37.♘e4?

Show/Hide Solution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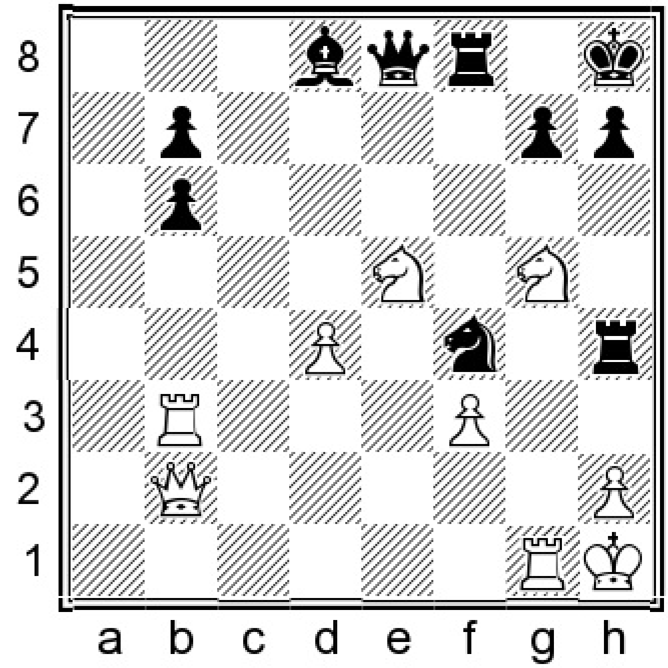
Answer: You would reply 37...♖xh2+!. Taking with the king receives mate, so 38.♕xh2 ♕xb5 is forced, with Black gaining a clear advantage.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37...♗xg5?

“This solution looked very simple and winning, but in fact it is not.” (Giri).

Question: Another mistake? It seems there have been too many already.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, a new one, but it is worth mentioning that these bad decisions from both players remained unnoticed until they were pointed out by the engines, showing how difficult it is to play a complex position in time trouble even for the strongest players.

As we will see later, Giri talked about this in *New In Chess*.

Exercise (difficult): Show the line missed by Carlsen.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Black had a winning line: 37...♖f5! 38.♘e4 ♖xh2+! 39.♕xh2 ♖h5. Black has a queen and two pawns for two rooks after 40.♖b2 ♖xh2+ 41.♖xh2, but White has no threats while Black can advance his b-pawn and should gradually convert his advantage.

38.♖xg5 ♘e6 39.♖g4?

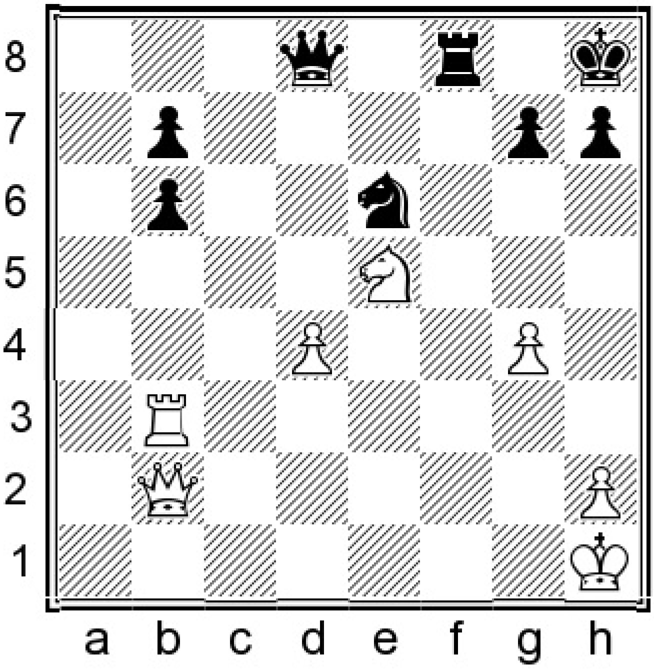
“It is hard not to make this move, since d4 was hanging with tempo, but in fact it was necessary to consider all options at this point, as White is on the verge of defeat.” (Giri).

White should have avoided the rook swap. After 39.♖g1! ♘xd4 40.♖e3 “White pulls his pieces together and, surprisingly, has reasonable chances to conduct a successful defence,” said Giri.

39...♖xg4 40.fxg4

40.♘xg4 ♕a4! doesn’t help either. 41.♖xb6 receives mate after 41...♕d1+

40...♕d8



41.♖h3

Giri looked at 41.♖f3 ♖xf3 42.♘xf3 ♕d5 43.♕c3 where he thought 43...♕c6 was good enough to win, and the engines confirm it, and added a new winning idea, 43...h6, as after 44.♔g1 ♕e4 “Black is likely to win a pawn on the kingside as well.” (Giri).

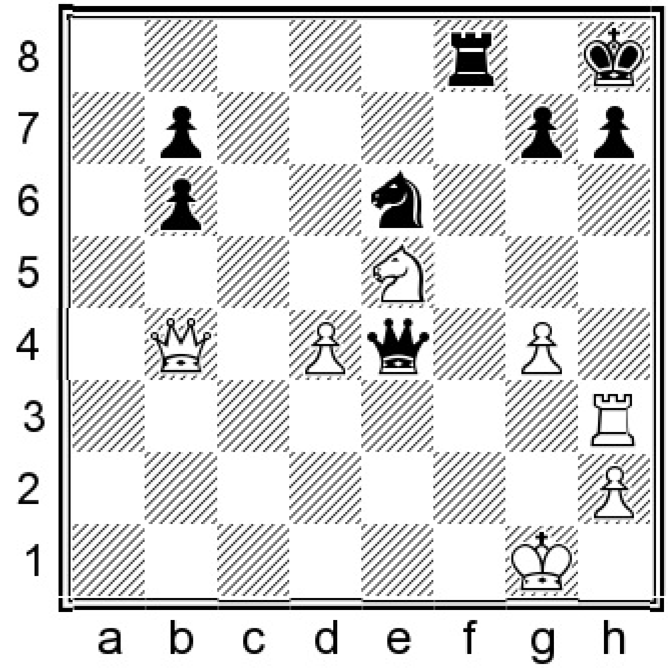
Giri saw that his first idea, 41.♖d3, didn’t work.

Exercise: What refutation of 41.♖d3 did Giri see?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Black wins playing 41...♕d5+ 42.♔g1 ♖f1+! 43.♔xf1 ♕h1+ and 44...♕xh2+, capturing the white queen.

41...♕d5+ 42.♔g1 ♕e4 43.♕b4



Exercise: How did Carlsen finish off the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

43...♖f6

The rook has left its vulnerable square, g6 is defended, and the knight is ready to go to d4 or f4. The queen is also free, so further resistance is futile.

0–1

Carlsen soon got a good position and outplayed Giri, constantly improving the position of his pieces. It was a fight where Carlsen was always on top, at least this was the general impression of both players after the game.

Giri summarized afterward: “I was obviously hoping to put some pressure on him, but, somehow, I didn’t manage to guess the right opening. It got from bad to worse and of course now my tournament situation is not what it could have been otherwise.”

Commenting for *New In Chess*, after more profound analysis, Giri changed some of his impressions of the game: “Curiously, while this game was of poor quality if looked at under a microscope, at no point in the game did my opponent make an ugly move, nor take a decision that could be called less than sensible. This goes to show the high class of the world champion, and at the same time the complexity of our game.”

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) You must evaluate what is preferable, material or squares (11...a4!).

2.) “If you want squares, you have to give squares!” (Najdorf and Fischer). (20...f4!).

3.) “Invite everybody to the party.” If you can, play with all your pieces in the battle. (16...♕d7! 23...♘b4! 24...♕h6! *28...♖h4!*).

4.) King safety is the most important factor of the position most of the time. (*37...♖f5! 37...♖xh2+!* in reply to *37.♘e4*).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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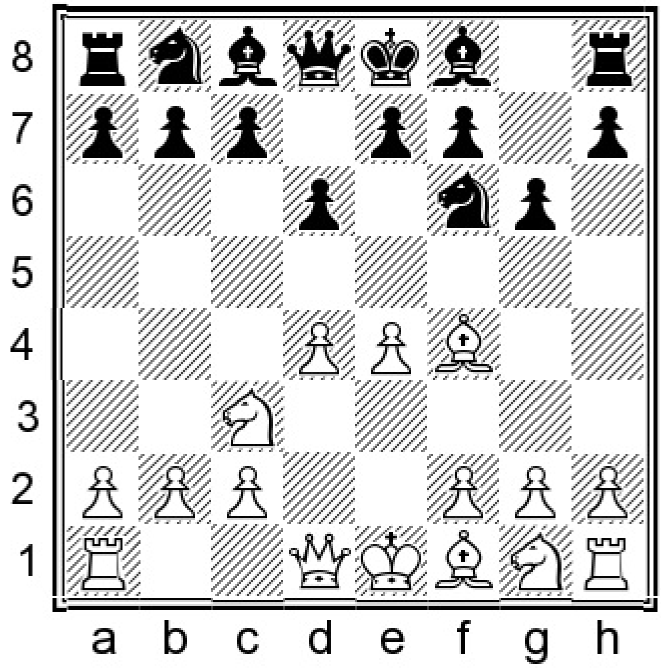
Game 23
Maxime Vachier-Lagrave – Magnus Carlsen
Pirc Defence [B08]
Biel (2), 23.07.2018

1.e4 d6 2.d4 ♘f6 3.♘c3 g6 4.♗f4



Question: Not a popular variation, right?

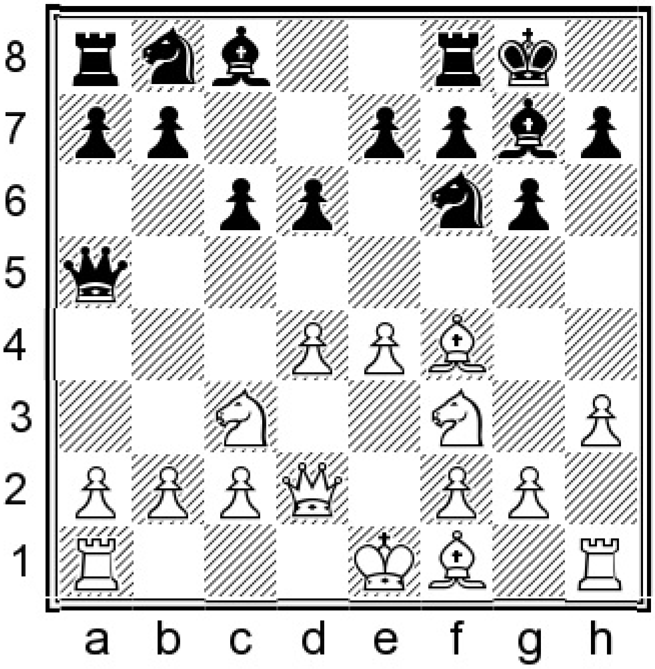
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Not very, that’s right. Vachier-Lagrave said after the game: “I thought I should try to get Magnus out of book somehow but it didn’t turn out well.” But he pointed out that he knew this line and he had analysed it from Black’s perspective via a different move order: 1.d4 ♘f6 2.♗f4 g6 3.♘c3 ♗g7 4.e4 d6.

4...c6 5.♘f3 ♗g7 6.♕d2 0-0 7.h3

MVL decided to play a solid move. There are not many top games with this position. 7.0-0-0 is more aggressive and 7.♗h6 is played more often, though generally the latter games arrive at this position after 4.♗e3.

7...♕a5



8.e5

Question: A surprising decision, right?

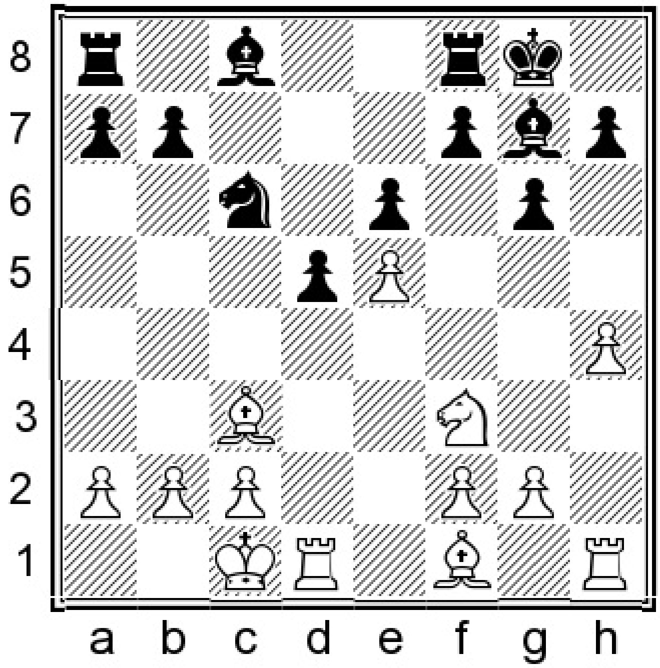
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, it is. White decides to reach an ending, skipping the middlegame, but naturally with a plan.

8...dxe5 9.dxe5 ♘d5 10.♘xd5 ♕xd2+ 11.♗xd2 cxd5 12.0-0-0 ♘c6 13.♗c3

This was the idea. White protects the e5-pawn and will begin his offensive on the kingside, while Black still has nothing on the queenside.

13...e6 14.h4



This position is similar to a French Defence, but with a black bishop on g7. Normally there is a white pawn on f4, so here the e5-pawn is not as solid.

White is effectively the first to initiate the offensive.

Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

14...h6

Carlsen played a “human move”. If now 15.h5, he is ready to play 15...g5.

The engines suggest an alternative defence, to continue simply with 14...♗d7 and only after 15.h5 do they answer 15...h6. Then after any White move Black would play ...g5. The opening of the h-file after 16.hxg6 fxg6 is not really frightening, as Black gets counterplay on the f-file. If 17.♗d3 he can play 17...g5 without problem.

This is a non-standard solution, unavailable in usual French positions, because, as we said, normally there is a white pawn on f4, stopping a possible ...g5.

15.♗d3 ♗d7

Black continues with his development and slowly prepares his counterplay on the queenside.

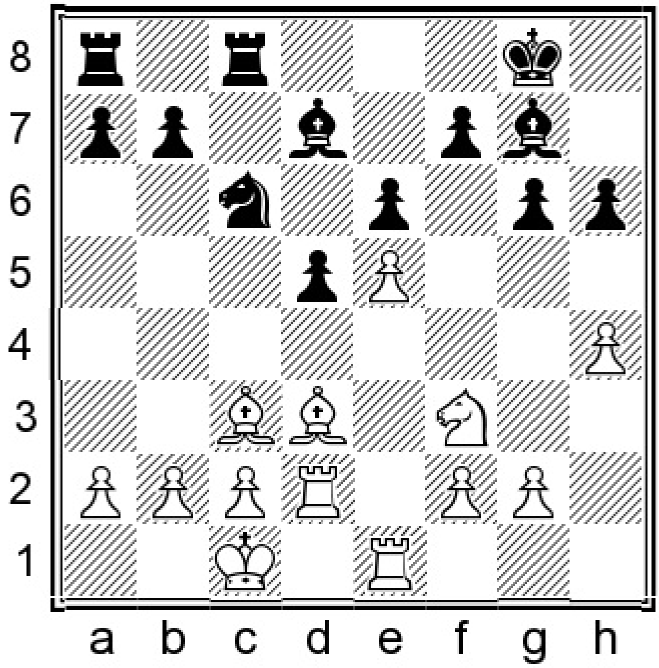
16.♖he1 ♖fc8 17.♖d2?!

White has many moves, but no clear plan to gain the advantage. Nielsen commented that this was a miscalculation, and that White needed to be more careful, playing 17.♗d2. It was possible to begin with 17.♔b1, too.

Question: They look like rather cryptic moves. Why play them?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: We will discuss this after the next move.



Exercise: What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

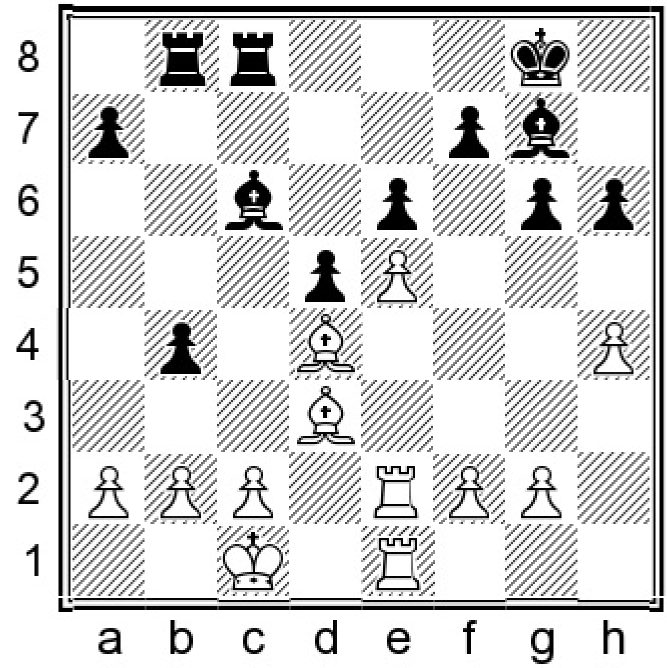
17...♖ab8!

Black prepares his offensive, too.

Now the explanation for 17.♗d2 (or 17.♔b1 first): the idea is to prepare a defensive set-up (slightly similar to 14...h6): after 17...♖ab8 18.♔b1 b5 White would play 19.a3! a5 20.b3!, ready to close the queenside. If ...a4 White plays b4, or if ...b4 then a4.

“One could argue that White then would have a free hand on the kingside, but Black’s solidity there still makes the position rather equal, even so a much better scenario compared to what happens now.” (Nielsen).

18.♖de2 b5 19.♘d4 b4 20.♘xc6 ♗xc6 21.♗d4



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21...♗b5!

Black exchanges his “French” bishop. Normally this is a good idea, but tactics are almost always necessary. MVL expected Black to protect his undefended a7–pawn, but forgetting that 22.♗xb5 ♖xb5 23.♗xa7 is not a threat. Black would play 23...♖a5, regaining the pawn under favourable circumstances.

22.♔d2 h5

“It’s already slightly unpleasant,” said MVL. The g7-bishop is ready to move to h6.

23.f4 ♗f8 24.g4!?

A very temporary pawn sacrifice, speeding up White’s counterplay, trying to get to Black’s king first.

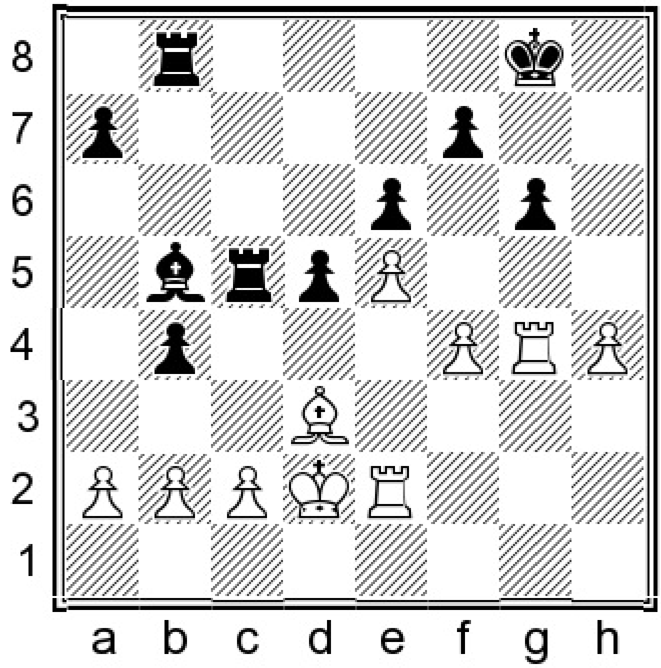
24...hxg4 25.♖g1

Regarding 25.h5 gxh5 26.♖h1: “Somehow it felt a bit suspicious,” said MVL. At the board it would have been impractical, though it was theoretically possible.

25...♗c5

Black exchanges his “good” bishop too, to create space for his king and rooks.

26.♗xc5 ♖xc5 27.♖xg4



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

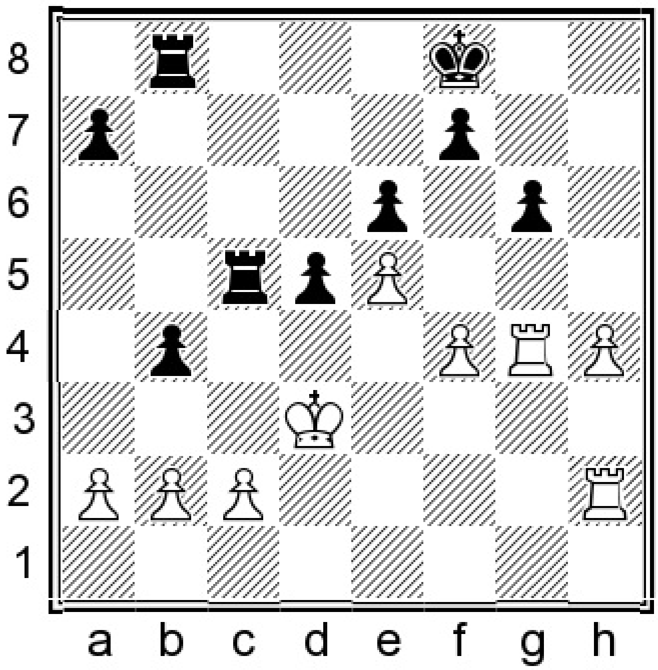
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

27...♔f8!

The king moves away from the kingside just in time, avoiding the threat 28.h5 which would force a passive defence of the g6-pawn.

28.♖h2 ♗xd3 29.♔xd3



Exercise: Carlsen played “a crucial move” now, according to MVL. What is it?

Show/Hide Solution

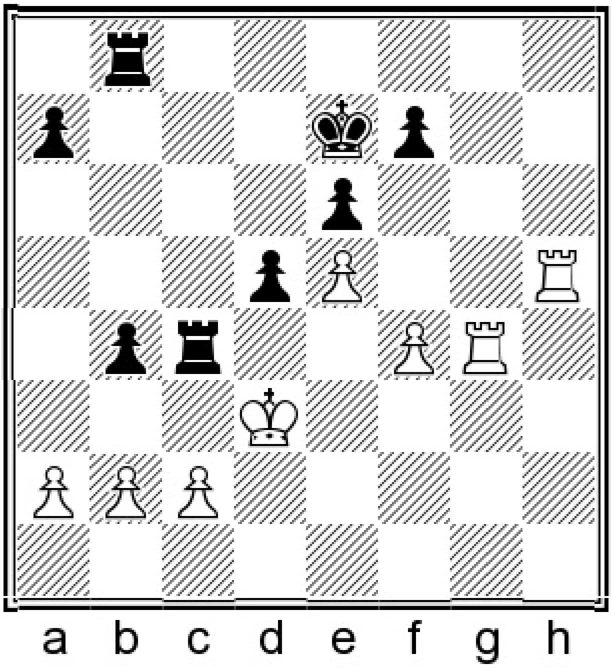
Answer:

29...♖c4!

The rook is now active along the 4th rank and the c-file. MVL overlooked this, so from a practical point of view it was very strong.

Objectively it is not that terrible for White, but at the board, as we know, sometimes objectivity is not so important.

30.h5 gxh5 31.♖xh5 ♔e7



32.♖gh4?

Now Black's position, from better in practice, becomes objectively better, too.

At the board, it was difficult to find the best move, 32.♖h6!, planning to go to f6 where the rook hits f7 and defends f4. White's idea would be to attack f7 playing ♖g7 with his other rook.

So, no matter how it looks at first sight, Black's king is not really better situated than White's.

Exercise: How did Carlsen punish the mistake?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

32...♖g8!

Black immediately occupies the open file, and his attack is stronger.

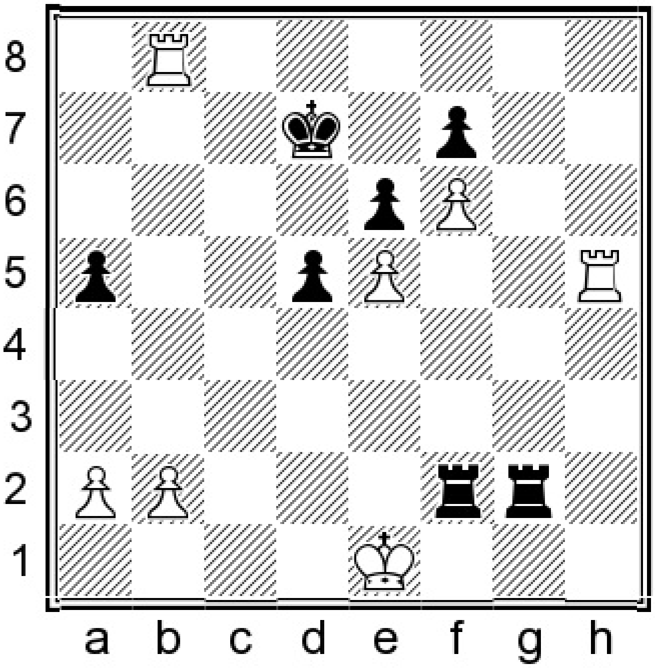
33.f5 ♖g3+ 34.♔d2 ♖g2+ 35.♔d1

Vachier-Lagrave indicated that 35.♔e3 was not acceptable. After 35...exf5 36.♖xc4 dxc4 37.♖xf5 ♖xc2 38.♔d4 b3, White's position is "resignable" according to him, but the best chance was probably 35.♔d3 exf5 36.♖xc4 dxc4+ 37.♔xc4 ♖xc2+ 38.♔b3 ♖f2, and Black is better, but White is still fighting.

35...♖cxc2 36.f6+

White also gets counterplay, but the big difference is the safety of the kings, which greatly favours Black: the black king will move to the queenside, while the white king, now on d1, will constantly be under mating threats.

36...♔d7 37.♖xb4 a5 38.♖b8 ♖cf2 39.♔e1



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

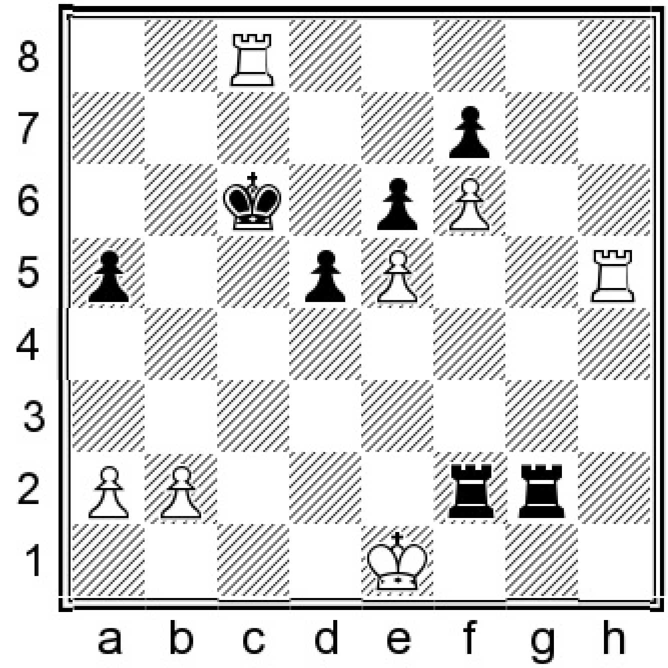
Answer:

39...♔c6!

After 39...♖xb2 40.♖xb2 ♖xb2 41.♖h7! the phrase “all rook endings are drawn” will be true once more, as White gets enough counterplay.

Now, though, the black king aims to reach a safe place and continue with his mating threats against the white king

40.♖c8+



40...♔b5?!

Question: Dubious? This seems to be exactly following the plan you mentioned.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, it's very surprising, but as we know, tactics are essential in chess. Black played this logical move to reach time control, but the engines show that, although also winning, it is surprisingly inaccurate.

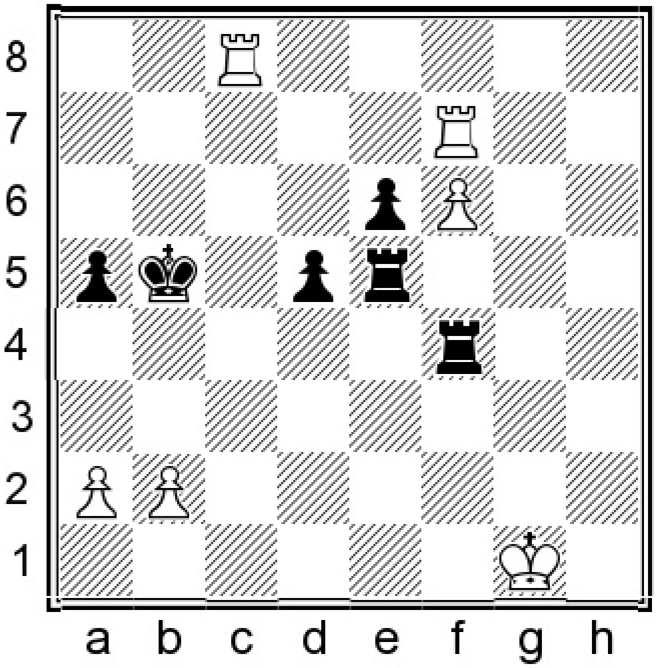
Black could win more easily playing 40...♔b6!. After 41.♖h7 ♖e2+ 42.♔f1 ♖gf2+ 43.♔g1 ♖f4 44.♖xf7 ♖xe5, threatening mate in two moves, after e.g. 45.♖g8 ♖ef5 White has no counterplay and Black will begin to advance his two passed pawns.

41.♖h7 d4!

Black is still winning, but MVL is allowed to get practical chances.

Exercise: Show the difference between the king being on b5 instead of b6 after 41...♖e2+ 42.♔f1 ♖gf2+ 43.♔g1 ♖f4 44.♖xf7 ♖xe5.

Show/Hide Solution



Answer: White has the saving move 45.♖b7+!, and 45...♔a6 46.♖b3 avoids the mating threat leading to a drawn ending.

42.♖g8

“Resourceful and creative as ever, even in the direst of situations, the Frenchman manages to cause confusion.” (Nielsen).

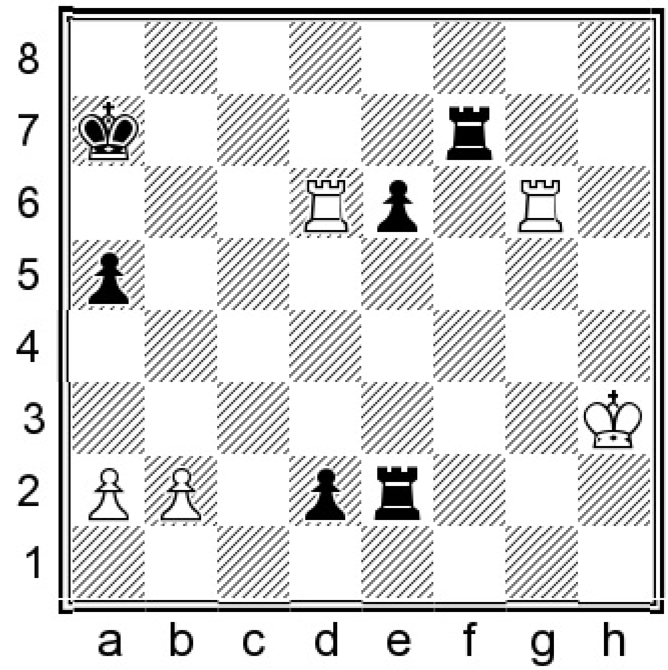
42...♖e2+! 43.♔f1 ♖gf2+! 44.♔g1 ♖f4! 45.♖xf7 ♖xe5 46.♖c7 ♖xf6?!

This is also a logical move and still winning, but 46...d3! was stronger. After 47.♖b8+ ♔a4! Black threatens our known mate in two moves with 48...♖g5+, and 47.♖d7 is no defence due to 47...♖d5.

47.♖b8+ ♔a6 48.♖c6+ ♔a7 49.♖g8 ♖f7 50.♖g6 ♖e1+ 51.♔g2 d3?!

As White’s threats are not dangerous, Black could calmly advance his two passed pawns after 51...e5 or first play 51...♖e2+ 52.♔g3 ♖e3+ 53.♔g2 e5. Now White has good practical chances again.

52.♖d6! ♖e2+ 53.♔h3 d2



54.♖g8!

Question: Black seems to be winning. He has a material advantage and the white king is too far away. Why is White's move so good?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The situation is not totally clear. Let's hand the word to Nielsen: "White simply wants to double on the d-file, making sure the d-pawn goes nowhere as well, as if Black starts defending with both rooks on the 2nd, then there is an easy perpetual on d7 and d8. It is no longer a matter of Black winning, but of finding practical chances."

Carlsen was tired and had also lost faith in his advantage, but he found an idea to continue fighting.

Exercise: How did Carlsen maintain his winning chances?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

54...♔b7!

"At this point I was about to give up but then I saw there were some chances. Not even some chances, probably major chances," said Carlsen.

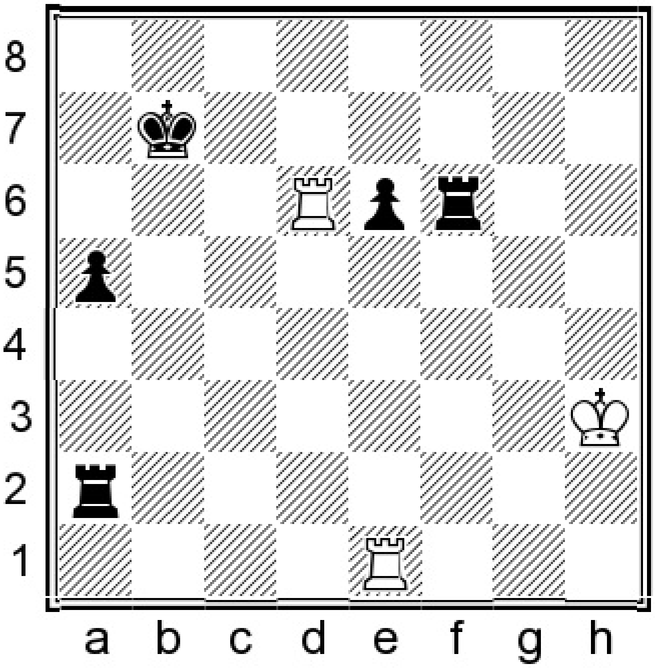
Vachier-Lagrave called 54...♔b7 a great move. The rooks are not enough to win the game alone; he needs to activate the king, too.

In some concrete lines the king has to be able to get to c7 and attack the d6–rook.

55.♖gd8 d1=♕

55...♖ff2? allows the perpetual check mentioned by Nielsen.

56.♖xd1 ♖xb2 57.♖e1 ♖f6 58.♖d6 ♖xa2



Black is two pawns up, and the white king is too far off as before, but the ending is not clearly won, because the two white rooks are very active.

59.♔g3?

The king also wants to play, but “White has no time for this,” said Karsten Mueller.

59.♖dxe6? ♖xe6 60.♖xe6 was no good either, because 60...♖f2! follows, cutting the white king off. (60...♖b2 leads to a tablebase win, too).

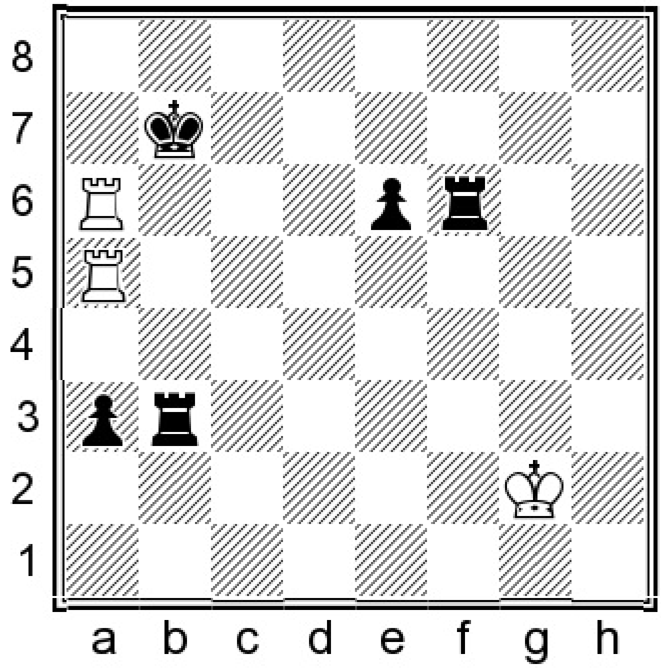
However, after 59.♖b1+! ♔c7 60.♖a6! “his rooks are so actively placed that it is hard to see how Black can win.” (Mueller).

59...♖b2 60.♖e5 ♖b3+ 61.♔g2 a4 62.♖a5?!

White attacks the a-pawn, trying to recover one of the two pawns down, but... “After this the black a-pawn takes an important step forward, both 62.♖g5 and 62.♖h5 were more stubborn,” said Mueller.

Black still has chances, but it is more difficult, e.g. let’s see the best line for both sides given by the engines: 62.♖g5 ♖b2+ 63.♔g3 ♖b6 64.♖g7+ ♔a6 65.♖d4 ♖b3+ 66.♔g4 ♖a3 67.♖g5 ♖f5 68.♖g6 ♖e5 69.♖g8 ♖ee3 70.♖b8 ♖eb3 71.♖a8+ ♔b5 72.♔f4 ♖e3, and Black will continue trying to win.

62...a3 63.♖da6



Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

63...♖ff3!

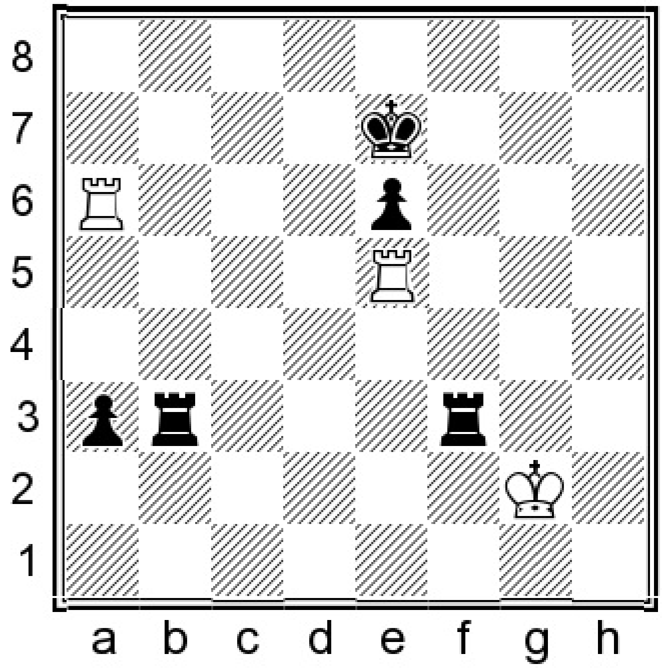
The e-pawn is not so important, as you can be sure that if White takes it he will not be in time to deliver perpetual check. It is the a-pawn which is critical for Black's victory.

64.♖a7+

These checks will be ineffective, because Black's king gets out of the danger zone easily.

Black's winning idea was to answer 64.♖xe6 with 64...♖fc3!, which "sets up an interesting formation, where Black threatens a mating attack on the 2nd and 1st ranks, while if 65.♖e2 then 65...♖c6! followed by ...♖a6 or ...♖b2 wins easily" (Nielsen), e.g. 66.♖f5 ♖g6+ 67.♔f1 ♖b1+ 68.♔f2 ♖b2.

64...♔c6 65.♖7a6+ ♔d7 66.♖a7+ ♔d6 67.♖7a6+ ♔e7 68.♖e5



Exercise: How did Carlsen take an important step forward?

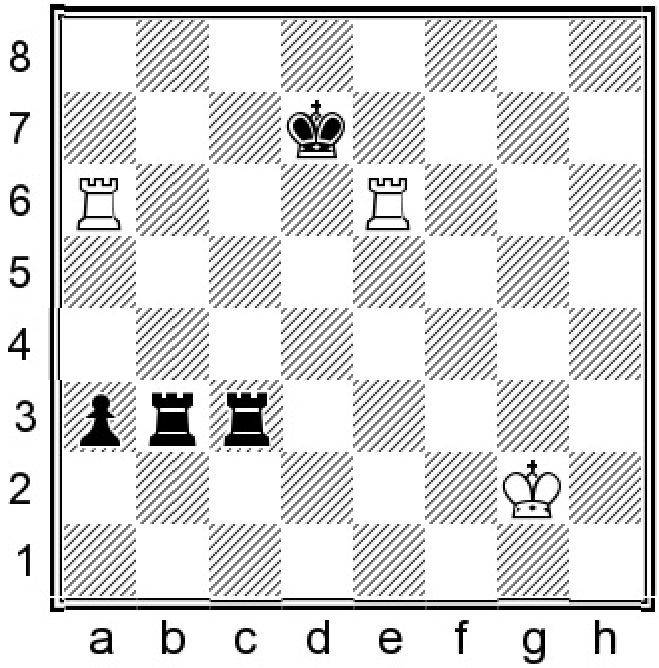
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

68...♖fc3!

As before, not caring about the e6–pawn, even with check. The mating threats will oblige White to maintain a passive defence.

69.♖exe6+ ♔d7



70.♔f2

This allows an exchange of rooks and the win is easier.

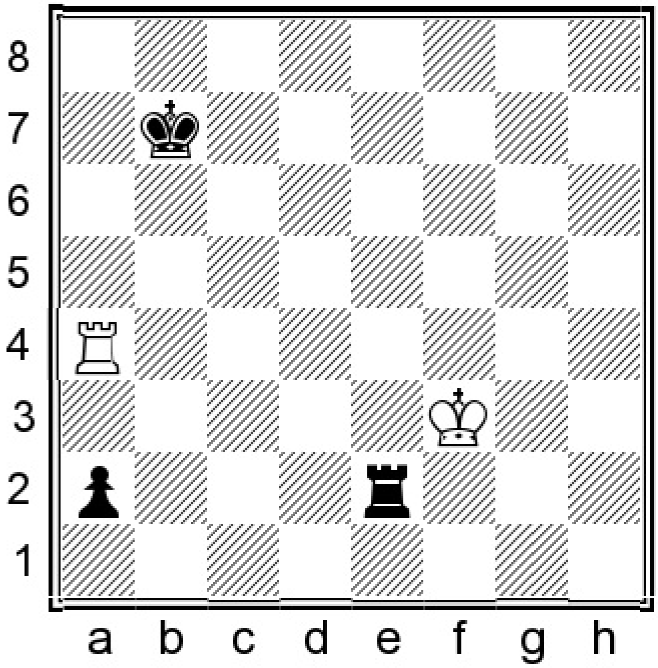
Anyway, there wasn’t enough defence. If 70.♖e2 Black should not precipitate playing 70...♖b2?, because after 71.♖xb2 axb2 72.♖b6 ♖c2+ 73.♔f3 ♔c7 74.♖b4 ♔c6 75.♔e3 ♔c5 76.♔d3 the king reaches the pawn in time to get a draw.

However, e.g. 70...♔c7 is enough to win. Black threatens 71...♖b2, so White must give Black space to improve his pieces. After 71.♖a4 ♖c6 72.♖f2 (or 72.♔f2 ♖f6+ 73.♔e1 ♖b1+ 74.♔d2 ♖b2+ 75.♔e1 ♖h6) 72...♔b7 73.♖f7+ ♔b6 74.♖a8 one winning line is 74...♖c2+ (74...♖cc3 also wins) 75.♖f2 ♔b7 76.♖xc2 ♔xa8 (threatening 77...♖b2) 77.♖c1 ♔b7!. Now the black king reaches the action first: 78.♔f2 ♔b6 79.♔e2 ♔b5 80.♔d2 ♔b4, and the white king doesn’t help. 81.♖d1 (or 81.♖a1 ♖b2+ 82.♔c1 ♔b3 83.♖b1 ♔a2) 81...a2 82.♔c2 ♔a3 83.♖d6 ♖c3+! among other moves, winning.

70...♖b2+ 71.♖e2 ♖h3 72.♔g2

After 72.♖xb2 axb2 73.♖b6 Black has the typical resource 73...♖h1! 74.♖xb2 ♖h2+.

72...♖xe2+ 73.♔xh3 a2 74.♔g3 ♔c7 75.♔f3 ♔b7 76.♖a4



Exercise (easy): Where did Carlsen put his rook?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

76...♖h2

As far away as possible.

77.♔e3 ♔b6

The trick we just saw is also winning: 77...♖h3+ 78.♔d2 ♖h1!

78.♔d3 ♔b5 79.♖a8 ♔b4

And the white king is one tempo short.

0–1

Carlsen had no problems in the opening, there was no middlegame and an equal ending soon appeared.

He obtained a slight advantage, his opponent didn't defend well, and Carlsen had a winning position after reaching the first time control.

However, it was not an easy job. Carlsen started playing inaccurately and MVL played with ingenuity and fought back, with good chances for a draw.

Carlsen said: "If there was a draw, the path was pretty narrow," showing how difficult the rook ending was. Carlsen eventually won nicely, after the second time control.

"At the end, I just had to calculate that I gain two tempi on each rook," he said, and his final comment was: "So I was a bit lucky, but that's the way it is sometimes."

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Always ask yourself "What is my opponent planning?" and "what defence does he have?" (*17.♗d2! 40...♔b6!*).

2.) It is always useful to ask oneself "Which piece should I exchange?" and "which piece should I keep?". (21...♗b5! 25...♗c5!).

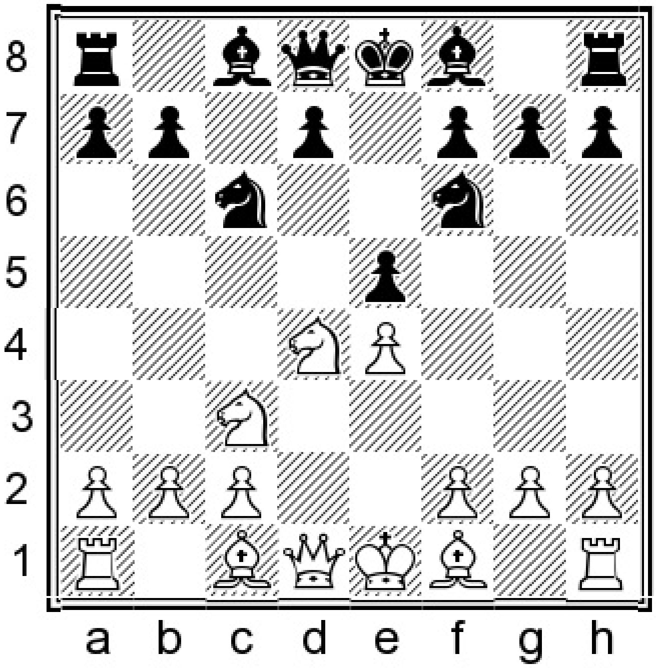
3.) Activity is almost always important, including in the endings. (29...♖c4! *32.♖h6!* 39...♔c6!).

4.) A potentially long and complex technical task can sometimes be simplified by paying attention to tactics. (*40...♔b6! 46...d3!* 51...d3?).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 24
Sergey Karjakin – Magnus Carlsen
Sicilian Defence [B33]
Gashimov Memorial Shamkir (8), 08.04.2019

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5



This game was played in the penultimate round of the tournament, and it was crucial for determining the winner. Magnus was leading the tournament by half a point ahead of Karjakin himself, and they were the only two who were competing for first place, as the rest of the field was one point behind Karjakin.

Question: So, considering the tournament standings, as Karjakin was almost in a "must-win" situation, why did Carlsen choose the Sveshnikov? Why not a Petroff or a Berlin?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, it is a rather surprising choice, but Carlsen stayed loyal to the Sveshnikov, allowing White to engage in a very complex battle – a battle Magnus was ready to face, but of course if there was a draw in a normal position, he would take it.

Question: Really loyal to the Sveshnikov – why does he like it so much?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: "This particular opening is a special case. If you turn on the computer early on it will say that White is better, but it doesn't say whether the position is easier to play for White or Black. Once he got out of the opening then it feels like, yeah, he's a pawn up, but it feels like the stakes are kind of higher for him. I'm going for mate, and he has to survive. Yeah, I think psychology is definitely a huge part of the game. It's one of the reasons why this particular line is doing well."

6.♘db5 d6 7.♘d5

Karjakin follows the path of Caruana against Carlsen in the World Championship match in London 2018, a few months earlier.

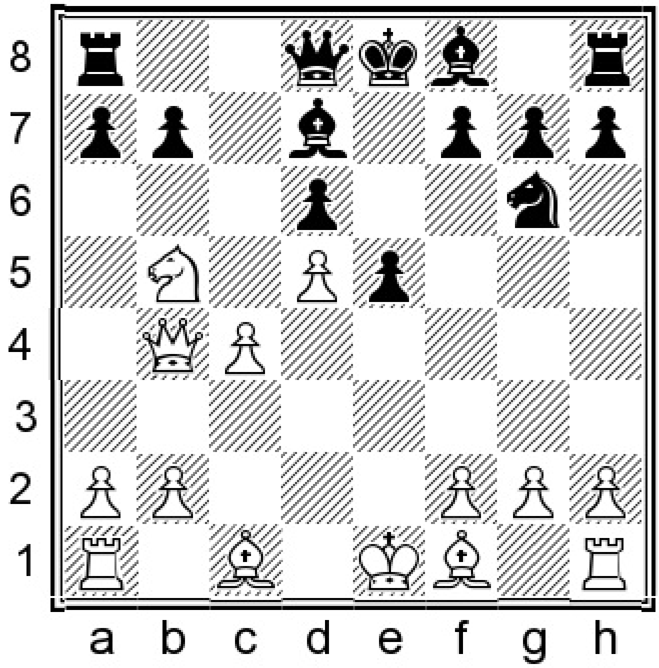
Caruana played 7.♘d5 four times after that (three in classical games and one in the tie-break). Against Jorden Van Foreest in Wijk aan Zee 2019, Navara in Shamkir 2019 and, shortly after this game, also in April 2019, he tried 7.♘d5 again against Carlsen in the Grenke tournament.

"People keep playing 7.♘d5 against me and I am always happy to see it, because it leads to interesting chess," said Carlsen.

7...♘xd5 8.exd5 ♘e7

Carlsen commented after the game: "Last time against Navara I played ...♘b8, but I decided to switch it up here. I think [Sergey] was a bit surprised by my choice, since I hadn't gone for this particular line since the 12th game of the match with Caruana." After this game Carlsen continued alternating both answers.

9.c4 ♘g6 10.♕a4 ♗d7 11.♕b4



11...♗f5

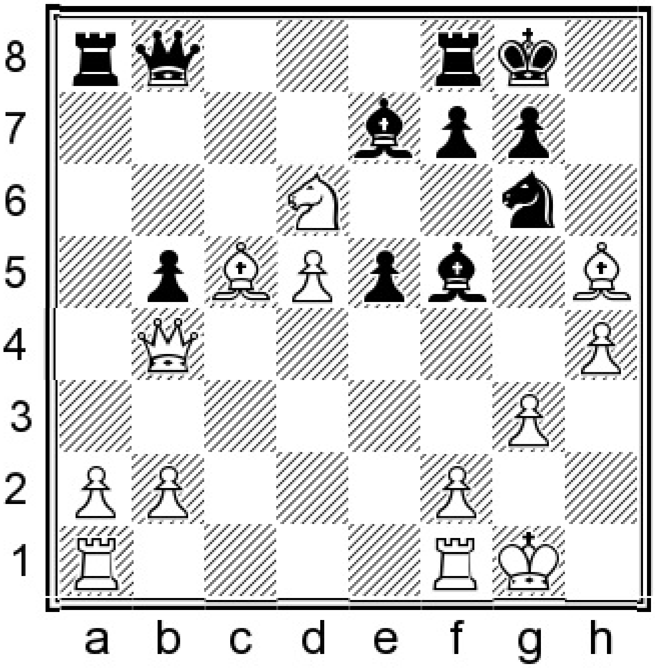
This move invites White to a move repetition with 12.♕a4 ♗d7, something his opponent wouldn’t choose considering the tournament situation.

Question: Is this the only move? I understand that a draw was enough in this particular game, but Carlsen is normally almost obliged to play for a win.

Show/Hide Solution

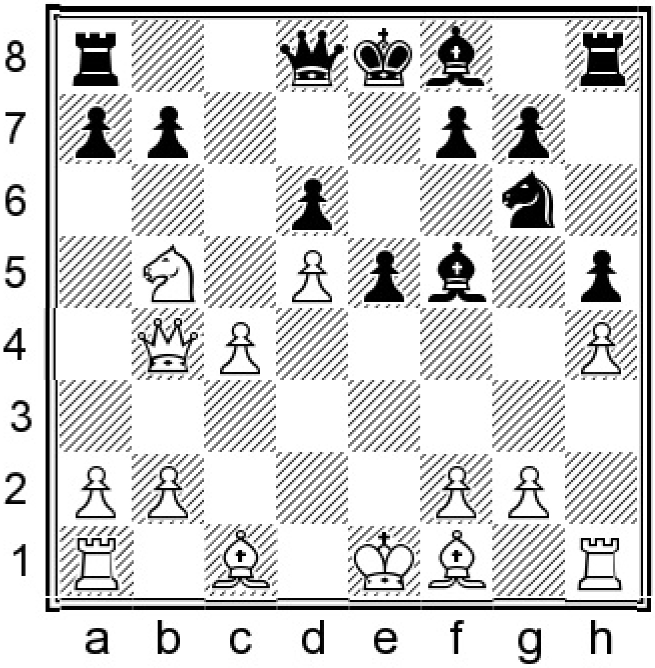
Answer: Carlsen said: “Obviously with the tournament situation I didn’t mind a draw,” but in normal situations he would play the alternative 11...♕b8 that he used in the World Championship match we mentioned.

Curiously, Carlsen played this position in a rapid game in one of the tournaments played during the pandemic, but as White. Carlsen – Gelfand, Legends of Chess, chess24.com 2020, continued 11...♕b8 12.h4 h5 13.♗e3 b6 14.♗e2 ♗e7 15.g3 a6 16.♘c3 b5 17.cxb5 axb5 18.0-0 0-0 (as we will see the h-pawn is frequently sacrificed in this line, but here 18...f5! planning ...f4 may be stronger) 19.♗xh5 ♗d8 20.♘e4 ♗f5 21.♘xd6 ♗e7 22.♗c5.



Here Black played 22...♗h3 and Carlsen won in 41 moves, sacrificing the exchange, but getting too many pawns for Black. Carlsen said that the critical line was to accept the queen sacrifice playing 22...♖a4 23.♘xf5 ♖xb4 24.♘xe7+ ♘xe7 25.♗xb4, where White is better, but it is still a fight.

12.♕a4 ♗d7 13.♕b4 ♗f5 14.h4 h5



15.♗g5

Karjakin varies from Caruana – Carlsen, London (m/12), 2018, which went 15.♗e3 a6 16.♘c3 ♕c7 17.g3 ♗e7 18.f3 ♘f8!, beginning an optimal rearrangement of his pieces. After 19.♘e4 ♘d7 20.♗d3 0-0 Black got a reasonable position.

Later, Carlsen got a clear advantage, and shocked almost everybody when offering a draw after 31 moves in what looked a much better position, but that was not so clear for him at the board.

After the draw, the match was decided on a tie-break, where Carlsen was the favourite, and he confirmed it by winning 3-0.

15...♕b8 16.♗e2

Four months later, Karjakin – Inarkiev, Nazran (rapid) 2019 (I changed the number of moves adding the repetition) followed a familiar path for us, 16.g3 a6 17.♘c3 ♗e7 18.♗e3 0-0 19.♗e2 e4! (here the pawn sacrifice is fully justified) 20.♗xh5 ♘e5 21.♗e2, and Black has enough compensation for the pawn and finally won. Now, instead of 21...♕c8, he could play the stronger 21...♗g4!, because 22.♘xe4?? loses to 22...♗f3!

16...a6 17.♘c3 ♕c7

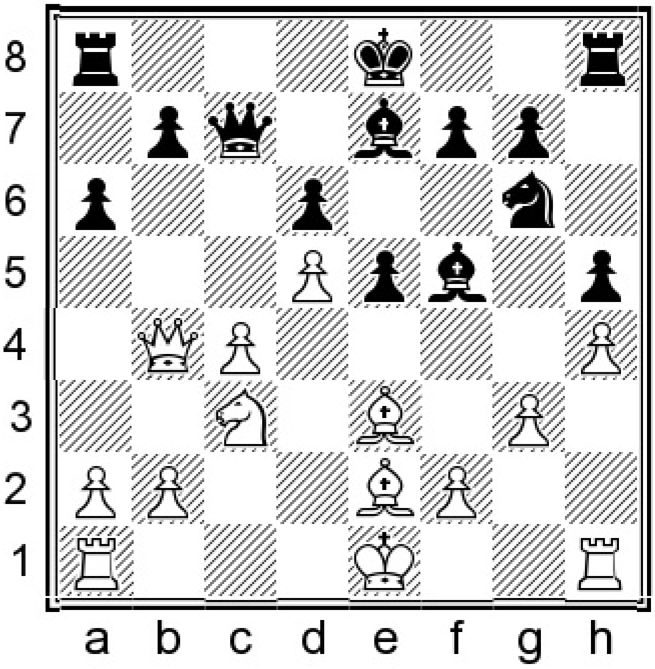
This is a novelty, diverging from a computer game 17...♘f4 18.♗f1 ♗e7 19.♗xe7 ♔xe7 20.g3 ♘g6 21.♕b6, Houdini – Stockfish, 2018.

Question: What is the idea of the novelty?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Black's idea was not to leave his king in the centre, as in the game between the computers, but that comes at a price, as we will see.

18.g3 ♗e7 19.♗e3



Black has several choices with different ideas.

Exercise: What do you think Carlsen played here?

Show/Hide Solution

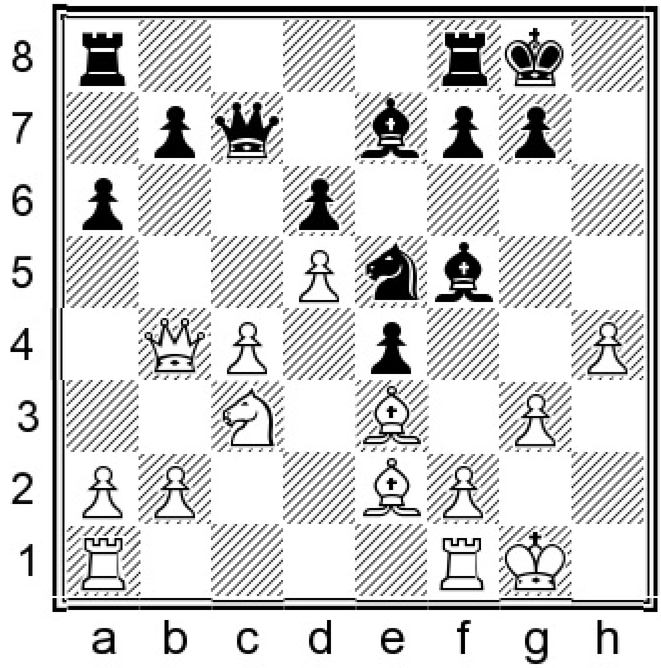
Answer:

19...e4!

Carlsen could play ...♘f8–d7, and then defend the h5-pawn before castling, which is fine, but his idea is more ambitious, and it is objectively right in this position: the g6-knight gets immediate access to e5, covering the vital squares f3 and d3. The importance of this was clear in the game Karjakin – Inarkiev that we mentioned.

“That the price is the h5–pawn is of no significance. Black is playing for mate!” (Nielsen).

20.0-0 0-0 21.♗xh5 ♘e5 22.♗e2



There are several moves available. Carlsen chose one of the most promising ideas.

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

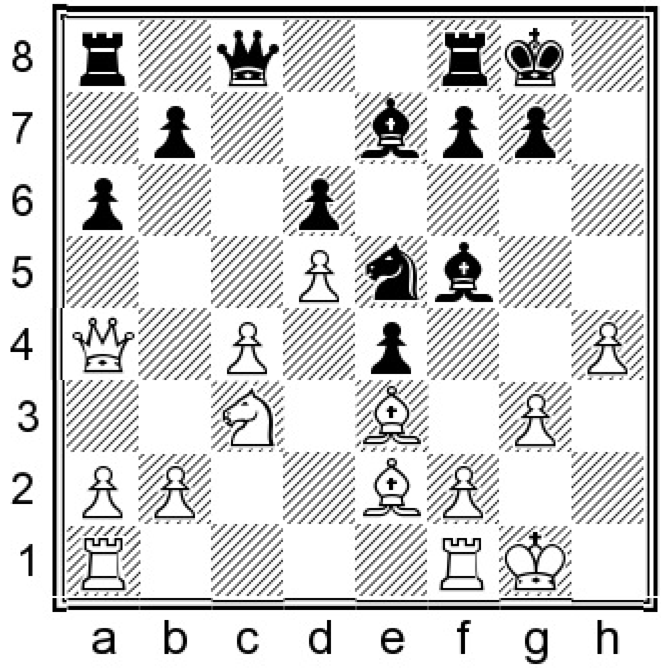
Answer:

22...♕d7!

Black is trying to exchange the light-squared bishops with 23...♗g4, which is favourable and welcome to the e5-knight.

23.♕a4 ♕c8!

Black needs the queen on the board. He is playing for mate, as we know, and now he renews the threat ...♗g4.



24.c5?!

Question: Dubious? Karjakin is looking for counterplay. Had he something clearly better?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It is frequently difficult to tell whether it is the right moment to play actively or, on the contrary, to go on the defensive.

Sometimes there is no obvious reply, and only analysis will objectively demonstrate which is the best move. That requires time, which at the board is limited, and also in a game of chess there is the human factor: not all players like to defend.

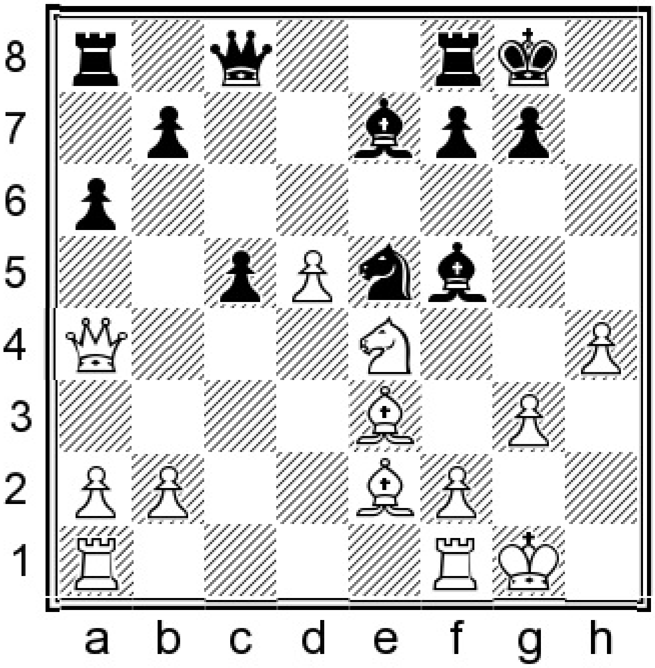
“Not unreasonable,” said Magnus about 24.c5. From the practical point of view, though, he will show that it is objectively too ambitious.

It will shortly be clear that 24.♕d1 was a stronger move, returning the pawn but avoiding ...♗g4. Play might continue 24...♘xc4 25.♗xc4 ♕xc4 26.♗d4 ♗d8-a5, or 26...♕d3, with a balanced position.

24...dxc5

24...♘f3+ 25.♗xf3 exf3 26.♕f4 ♗h3 27.cxd6 ♗xd6 28.♕xf3 ♗xf1 29.♖xf1 was worse: “White would get reasonable compensation for the exchange,” said Carlsen after the game, and the engines even slightly prefer White.

25.♘xe4



Black has more than one good move, including 25...♖e8, 25...b5 and 25...c4.

Here Carlsen made a truly Laskerian move, very strong from the psychological point of view, but also a good move.

Exercise: What do you think Carlsen played?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

25...c4!

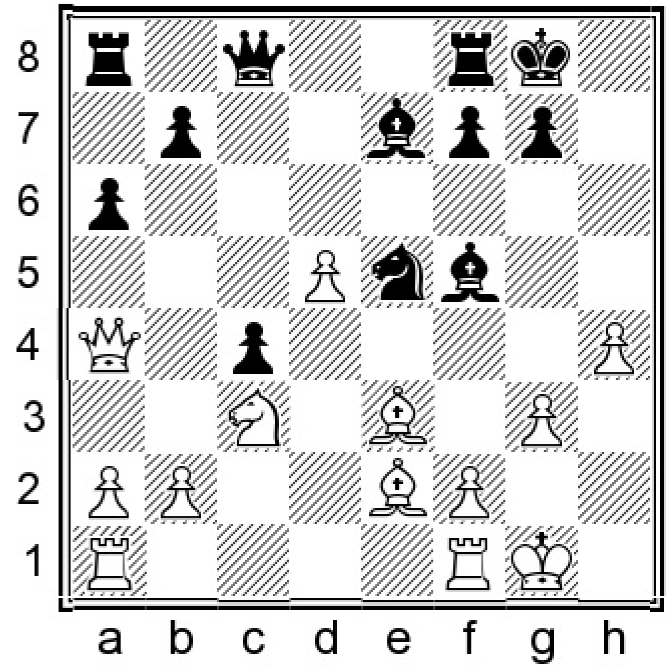
This is the explanation Carlsen gave as to why he preferred this move over the “obvious” and also good 25...b5: “I wanted to keep the initiative and I liked 25...c4 – I could also play ...b5, forcing him to go into this pin, but I wasn’t so sure. I thought it would be better to have the pawn on c4.”

26.♘c3?

“I think he just underestimated my plan,” said Carlsen, and added “Here I think he should definitely play 26.♕c2. It looks strange to pin himself, but I don't think there was a better choice."

After that "I was intending ...♖e8... I thought I had excellent compensation, but it's still a tense position."

So, it transpires that after 25...c4 the best answer is still 26.♕c2! The reasoning of the Laskerian move 25...c4! instead of 25...b5, where 26.♕c2 is forced is: "Why should I 'force' him to go in the right direction?"



"As far as I could judge from his body language he was resigned to a draw at this point," said Carlsen after the game.

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26...b5!

Carlsen deduced, from Karjakin's body language mentioned, that he expected 26...♗d3 27.♗xd3 ♘f3+ 28.♔g2 ♘xh4+ with perpetual check.

Leaving aside that Black could still play 27...♘xd3 with a promising position, a draw as we know was a good result for Magnus considering the tournament situation. However, as we saw in Game 21, Carlsen plays for a win if he thinks he has a clear advantage, even when a draw is sufficient.

27.♕d1 b4!

“I thought this idea is so attractive I should play on,” said Carlsen, after expulsing White’s knight from the centre and the kingside. Besides, Black’s bishop gets access to the e4 square, making Black’s attacking prospects just too strong.

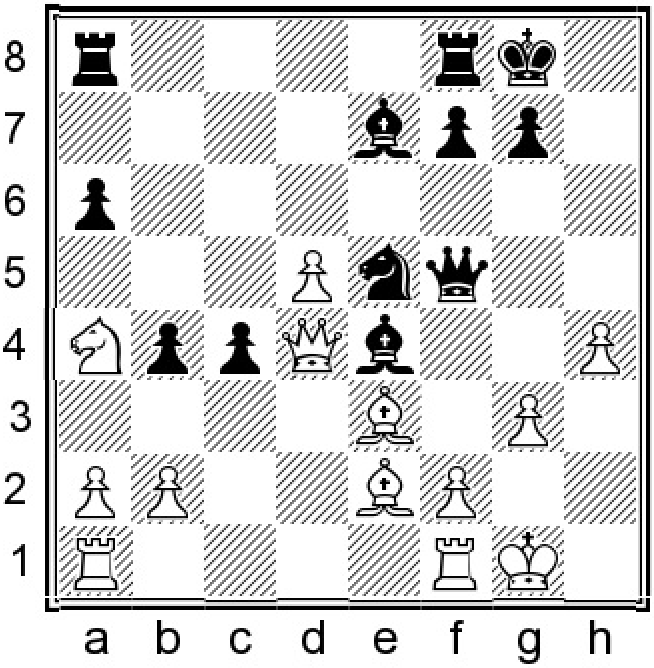
28.♘a4

“28.♘a4 is very, very ugly, because it’s quite likely that this knight will never move again – that’s what happened in the game.” (Carlsen).

28...♗e4 29.♕d4

If 29.f3 then 29...♕h3 30.♗f2 ♘g4! decides the outcome.

29...♕f5



30.f4?

Magnus said of 30.f3: “I’m sure it was his best chance, because after 30.f4 he’s more or less just busted. He’s not down material, but the difference in strength of the pieces is just too massive.”

After 30.f3 ♘xf3+ (not 30...♗xf3? 31.♖ae1! and White gets counterchances) 31.♗xf3 ♗xf3 32.♕f4 White has a stronger defence, although the d5-pawn is lost.

After 30.f4 Magnus started to show his tactical skills.

Exercise: How did he begin?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

30...♕g6!

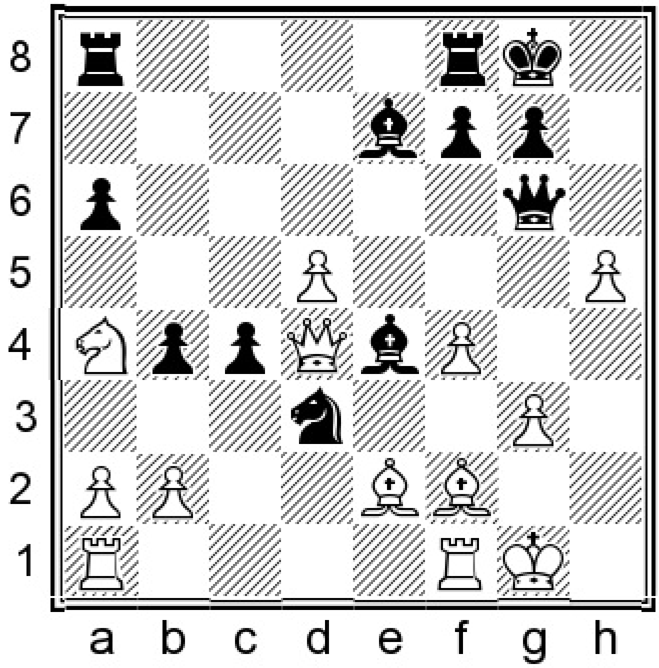
An intermediate move which is extremely powerful. Believe it or not, its idea is to weaken the f4 pawn.

The immediate 30...♘d3 allows 31.g4!, and the outcome will be far less clear after 31...♕h7 32.h5 than in the actual game.

31.♗f2 ♘d3

Black threatens 32...♘xf4.

32.h5



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

32...♕f5!

This is the big difference, possible because the move 31.♗f2 was forced. If now 33.g4 then 33...♕xf4 or even 33...♘xf4 follows as the pawn is unprotected.

You must always be alert and avoid excessive euphoria: 32...♘xf4? might look attractive, but after

33.♖ae1 ♕f5 34.♗g4!! the game turns around completely, e.g. 34...♕xg4 35.♖xe4 ♘e2+ 36.♔g2 ♘xd4 37.♖xg4, followed by ♖xc4, and White is much better.

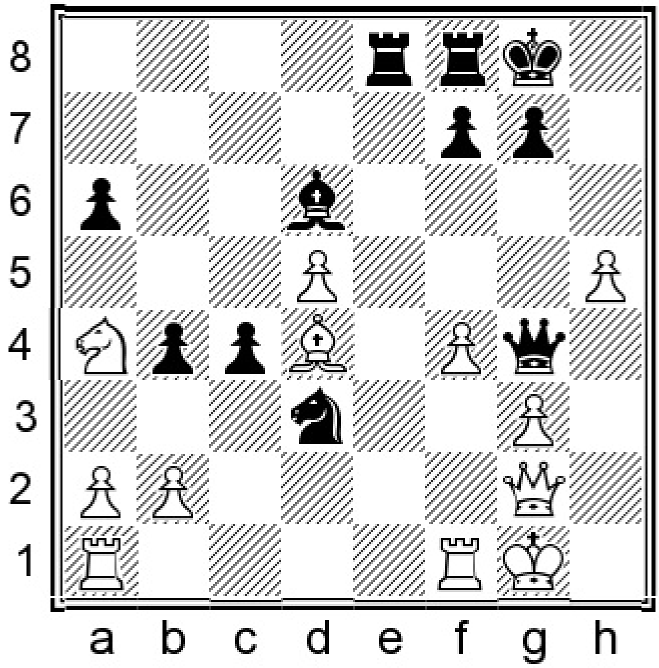
33.♗g4

“Now he absolutely has to take on d3,” Carlsen said, considering that White could still try to put up a fight in the endgame. This was preferable, but Black is nearly winning after 33.♗xd3 cxd3 34.♕e5 ♕xe5 35.fxe5 ♗xd5. His d-pawn is just too strong and White has too many weaknesses.

33...♕xg4 34.♕xe4 ♗d6

Black threatens to take on f4, and is ready to occupy the e-file. As Nielsen commented “...the main theme is that Black’s knight on d3 protects the e1–square, meaning that his rooks can penetrate unopposed along the e-file.”

35.♕g2 ♖ae8 36.♗d4



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

36...♕xh5!

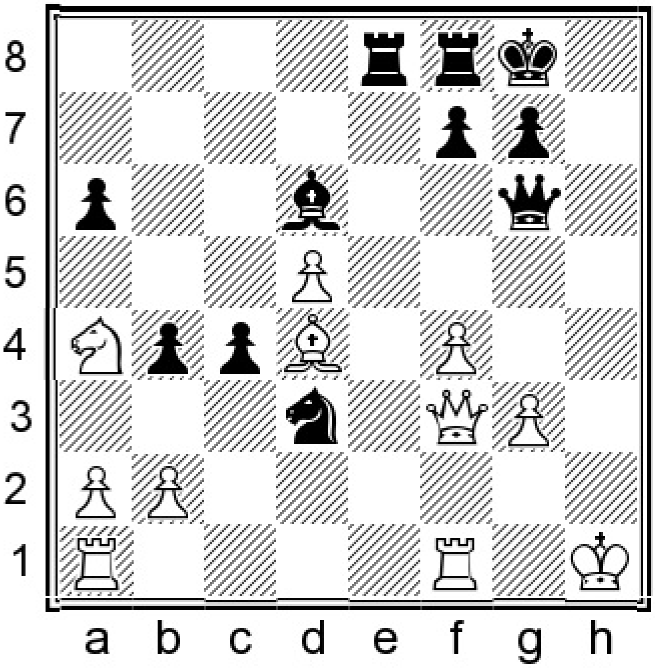
Better than 36...♖e2?! 37.♕f3!, which, even being a pawn down, is still very good for Black after e.g. 37...♕xf3 38.♖xf3 ♖fe8, but there is no reason not to try to win in the middlegame.

Now 37...♖e2 is a deadly threat as 38.♕f3 would allow mate on h2.

37.♕f3 ♕g6

Again, threatening to take on f4.

38.♔h1



Nielsen said that the attack on the f4-pawn was "to gain time for his real aims."

Exercise: What was Carlsen's "real aim"?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

38...♖e4!

Not the only strong move, but this simple move prepares the arrival of the only inactive piece and White is defenceless against the numerous coming threats.

39.♗f2 ♖fe8

Black threatens 40.-- 40...♘xf2+ followed by 41...♖e3, also 40...♖e2, and even the combination 40...♘xf4 followed by 41...♕h7+ and 42...♖xf4.

To show how untenable White's position is, the "joker" Stockfish even mentions the "threat" 40...♖4e7, losing a tempo but also winning because two of the continuations mentioned above cannot be stopped on the next move.

0–1

With this victory, Carlsen won the Shamkir tournament with a round to spare: “I think you can see that the game today was a special case because Sergey needed to win, so he played riskily, which allowed me to use my strengths in kind of an open battle, and in World Championships I’ve gotten the chance to do that less often, so I think that’s one of the reasons. When people take more risks, it becomes more open and it’s good for me.”

Asked about his games in the tournament, Carlsen said: “I thought today’s game, I don’t know if it was very good, but it was at least very interesting, and the game yesterday was interesting as well against Anish [Game 26 of the first volume], although I was a little bit upset that I didn’t manage to finish it off in the right way. Certainly, the last two games have been fun. I’ve been able to win or at least to play in an interesting dynamic attacking style. It’s not the way I usually win games, so it’s been a lot of fun frankly, the last two days – it’s been a great ride!”

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) It’s essential to know the typical ideas in the position or the opening chosen. (19...e4!).

2.) “Which piece should I exchange? Which one should I keep?” If you can find the right answers, you’ll probably discover the correct move and/or plan. (23...♕c8!).

3.) “How can I improve the position of my pieces? How can I diminish the position of my opponent’s pieces?” These are questions that, posed at the right moment, can give us clues to find the best move. (25...c4! 27...b4! *30.f3!*).

4.) Don’t forget to ‘invite everyone to the party’, bringing fresh forces into the attack. (38...♖e4!).

5.) Never underestimate the opponent’s defensive resources, even in difficult situations. (*32...♘xf4?* 36...♕xh5! *36...♖e2?*).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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Game 25

Peter Svidler – Magnus Carlsen

Sicilian Defence [B30]

Karlsruhe/Baden-Baden (8), 28.04.2019

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘c3

Svidler doesn’t allow the Sveshnikov.

3...e5

Carlsen has played exclusively this move in the past three years in this position, reaching a type of Botvinnik structure, which, like the Stonewall, leaves an unprotected central square.

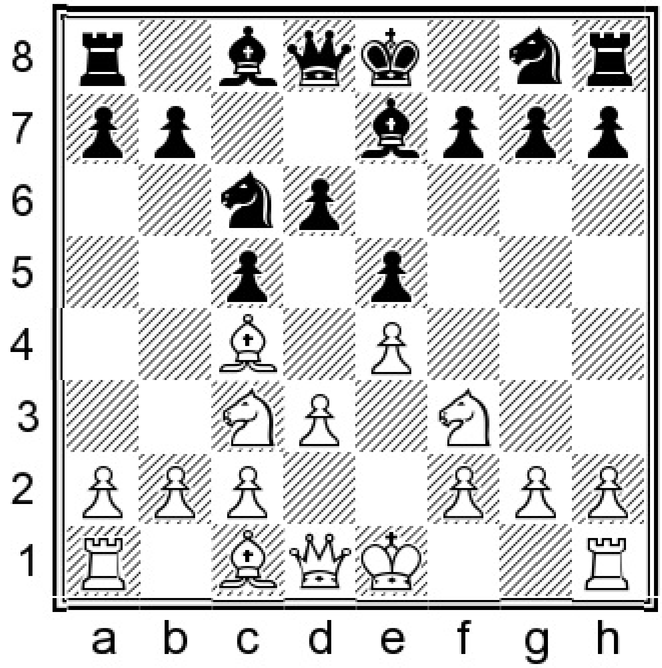
Before that, he tried 3...g6 several times. This allows a Dragon Variation after 4.d4. He also used to play 3...e6 sometimes.

Note that he also plays this structure with the white pieces after 1.c4 e5 2.♘c3 ♘f6 3.g3 ♗b4 4.e4. The first time was during the tie-break of his match against Caruana in London 2018.

4.♗c4 ♗e7

As we will see in another game, Carlsen also plays 4...g6 in this position.

5.d3 d6



6.♘d2

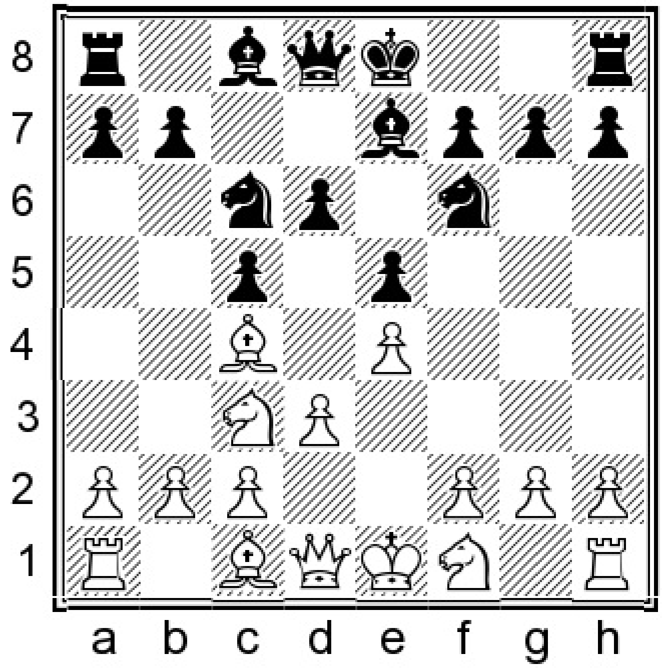
Kasparov’s move, aiming to reach e3 and control d5.

Other possibilities are 6.0-0 ♘f6 7.♘g5 0-0 8.f4 and, less frequently, the simple 6.♘d5.

6...♘f6

This logical developing move has replaced 6...♗g5 as the main option.

7.♘f1



7...♘d7

Question: Why not 7...0-0 and only then decide what to do?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, to castle is a logical move and it’s more frequently played, but the text move was made by Ivanchuk against Anand in a semi-final of a World Championship, and later by players such as Kramnik, Gelfand, Radjabov, etc., so there must be something in it.

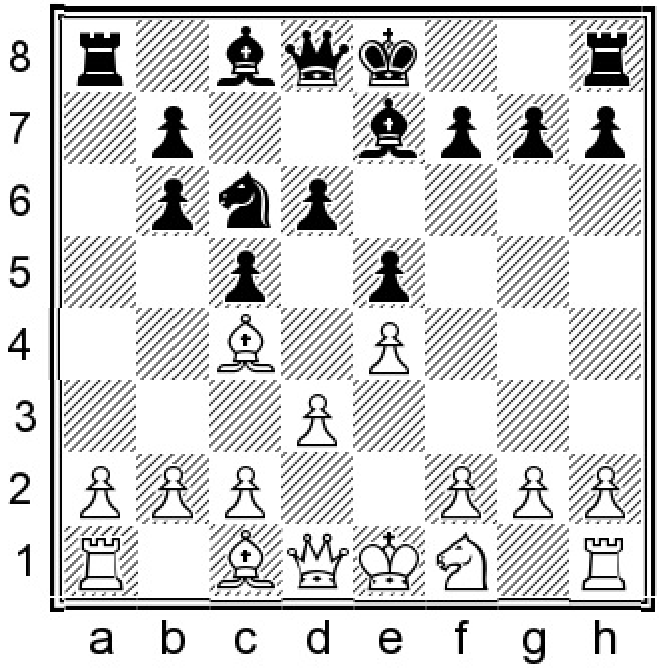
In the first place the move may be necessary or at least useful later if Black wants to play ...f5, and also the idea is to exchange White’s strong knight on d5 from b6. As Nielsen pointed out, “while obviously this also could be done from f6, and thus by logic Black just throws away 2 tempi, the point is doing it on Black’s terms, trying to force White to take on b6.”

8.♘d5 ♘b6 9.♘xb6

Black has fewer problems in case of 9.♘fe3 ♘xc4 10.dxc4 0-0 11.0-0 g6, with the idea of ...f5. (Ivanchuk).

9...axb6

In case of 9...♕xb6 10.♘e3 0-0 11.♘d5 Black would have effectively lost two tempi, but this recapture changes the structure of the position.



10.c3

Question: Why not the immediate 10.♘e3?

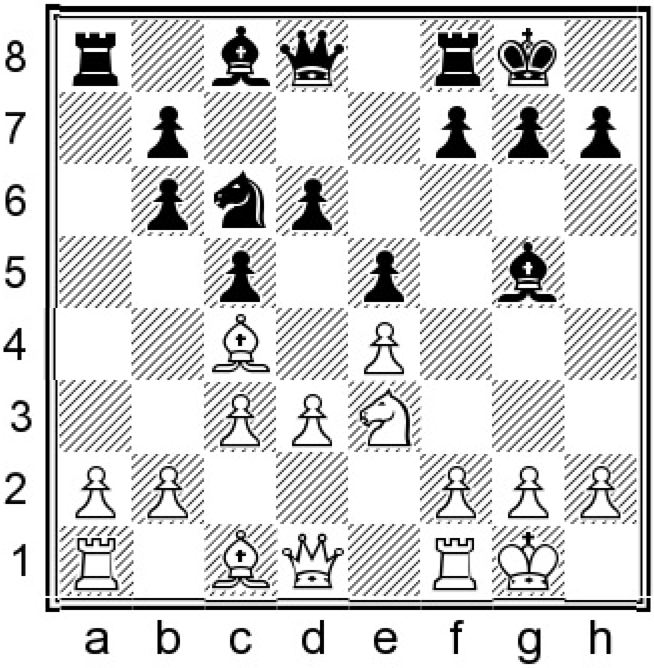
Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The text move is a useful move, controlling d4, while after 10.♘e3 Black would answer 10...b5!, gaining space, because 11.♗xb5? ♕a5+ loses a piece.

10...0-0 11.♘e3

11.h4 would give the position a different character. It's more a prophylactic move than an attacking idea, as it would stop Black's next move.

11...♗g5 12.0-0



Black has several ideas at his disposal.

Exercise: Which do you think Carlsen chose?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

12...♔h8!

Carlsen looks for active play. We can say that this move is consistent with 7...♘d7. It prepares a timely ...f5, and is also what Ivanchuk played again Anand in the game mentioned above, in Moscow

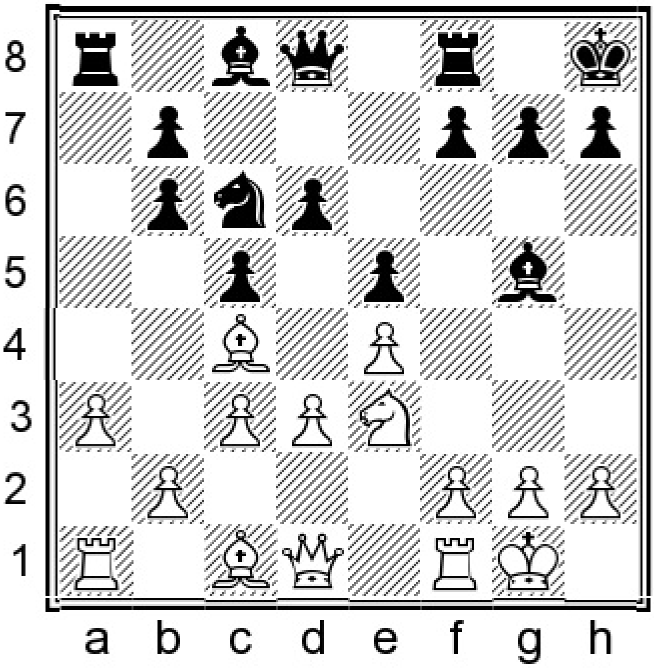
2001.

Ivanchuk proposed 12...♗e6, which, almost 20 years later, is considered a sensible option by the engines, while Kramnik against Leko in Dortmund 2003 played 12...♗xe3 and then 13...♕e7 followed by ...♗e6, which gives an equal position but after which it is difficult to play for a win.

13.a3?!

13.♗d2 was played in Anand – Ivanchuk. Black continued with Kramnik's recipe, 13...♗xe3, and after 14.fxe3 ♕e7 15.♗d5 ♗e6 White also had a slight advantage, but 0–1 in 42 moves.

Svidler trusts in the solidity of his position. He could play the logical 13.♘d5 now, which would have been safer, as after 13...♗xc1 14.♕xc1 f5 15.exf5 ♗xf5 16.♕e3, "White does keep a pleasant position with b4 or f4 next." (Nielsen).



So, Svidler could avoid 13...f5, but it seems clear that he doesn't fear it.

Exercise: What do you think Carlsen played now?

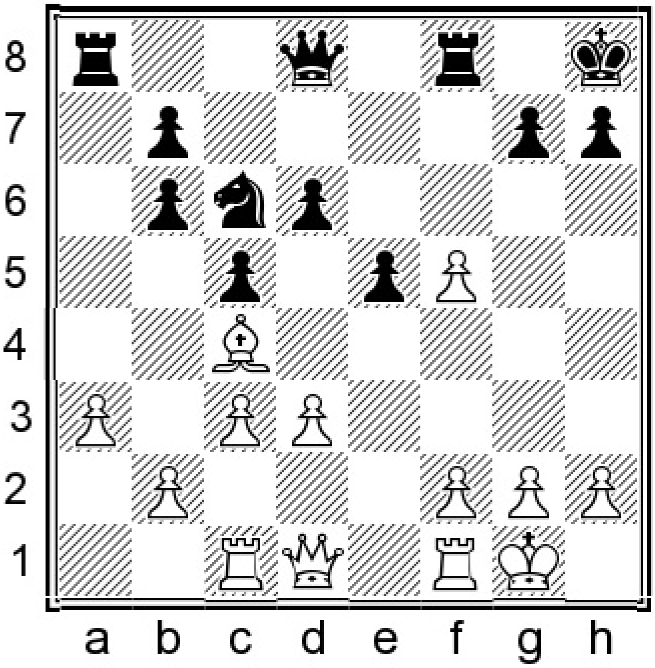
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

13...f5!

Yes. Why not? So, our assumption that Svidler didn't fear the advance is wrong, he just commented "Unexpected."

14.♘xf5 ♗xc1 15.♖xc1 ♗xf5 16.exf5



Exercise: What did Carlsen choose here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16...d5!

The bishop is locked out before Black regains his pawn.

17.♗a2

It would be very sad for Svidler, but not bad, to play 17.♗b5 ♖xf5 18.♗xc6, with an equal ending.

He instead played more ambitiously, trying to demonstrate that the d5–pawn is a weakness, and Svidler also considers that the a2-bishop is only temporarily out of play, and that when the a2-g8 diagonal reopens the bishop will be a stronger piece than the knight.

17...♖xf5 18.♕g4 ♖f6

The engines prefer 18...g6, which is not a “human” move. With the retreat in the game Black has the possibility of playing ...♖g6 or ...♖h6, and his king remains safer.

19.f4?

A logical and attractive move. The exchange of pawns will open up the f-file, seemingly in White’s favour, and the weakness of the d5-pawn will be more evident. Hence White has some initiative. Unfortunately, it is tactically unsound.

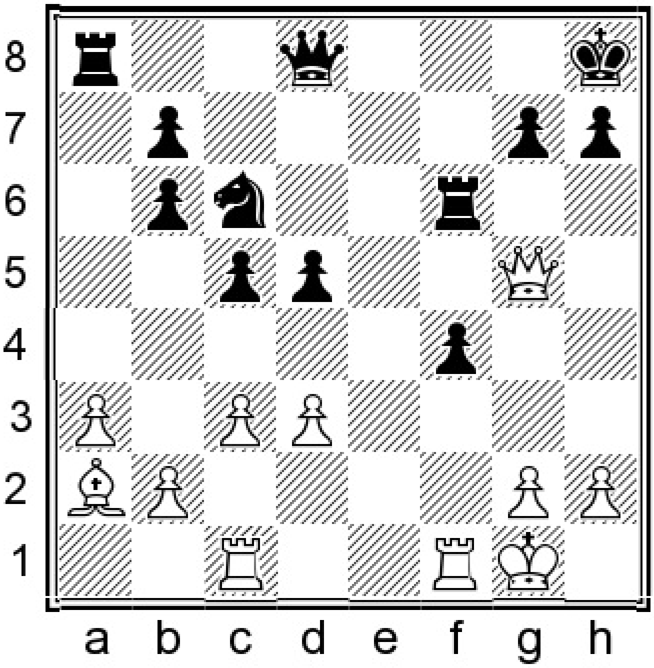
It was difficult to realise that White has to play cautiously. The engines suggest 19.♖ce1 ♕d6 20.♕d1, and Black has a good position, with a freer game. So Black may have a slightly preferable position, but no more than that.

19...exf4!

This is clearly better than 19...♖a4, when after e.g. 20.♕h4 ♖axf4 21.♖xf4 exf4 22.♖e1, White gets compensation for the pawn.

20.♕g5

This intermediate move is necessary, controlling e5, as 20.♖xf4? loses to 20...♘e5 21.♕g3 ♖xf4 22.♕xf4 ♘xd3.



Svidler missed Black's reply.

Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

20...♕f8!

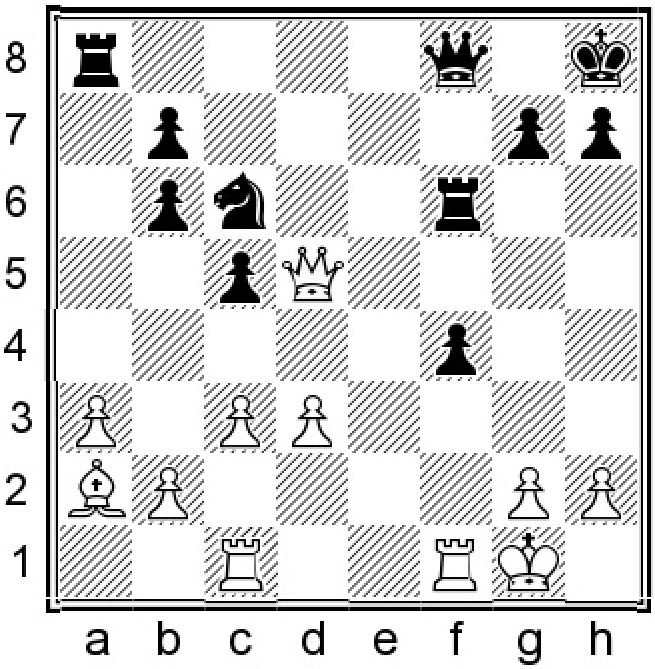
After this unexpected strong move "I am fighting for survival," said Svidler after the game. He expected 20...d4.

Question: But looking at the black pieces, it doesn't seem so frightening. So why is Black better?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: After this move, Black keeps the f4 pawn, which will be crucial in the next phase of the game, as we will see. And, at the same time, even if the a2-g8 diagonal reopens, the bishop on a2 will still be out of play, as 21.♗xd5? rerouting the bishop to the battlefield is impossible because it drops a piece after 21...♖f5.

21.♕xd5



Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21...♖d8

The only inactive piece enters the game with tempo, and pressurizes the d3-pawn.

22.♕f3?!

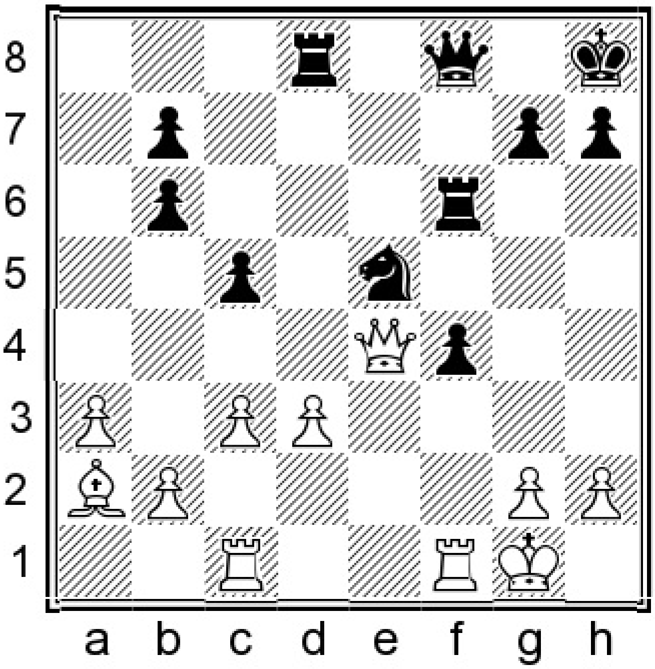
White defends his d3-pawn and keeps the b7-pawn under X-ray, to stop ...♘e5.

However, it will become clear that he needed to accept that Black was better and play 22.♕g5. After 22...h6 23.♕h5 ♖xd3 24.♖ce1 Black is a pawn up, but all white pieces are active and White is still fighting.

22...♘e5

Anyway, Svidler had seen this jump.

23.♕e4



23.♕xb7? was bad due to 23...f3!, but Svidler trusted in this intermediate move, which chases the knight away from e5 and thus avoid the lethal effects of ...f3.

Exercise: What did Carlsen play at this point?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

23...♘g4!

Not 23...♖e8? 24.♖ce1! and the attack is stopped. White threatens 25.d4. After 24...f3 25.♔h1! White is back in the game.

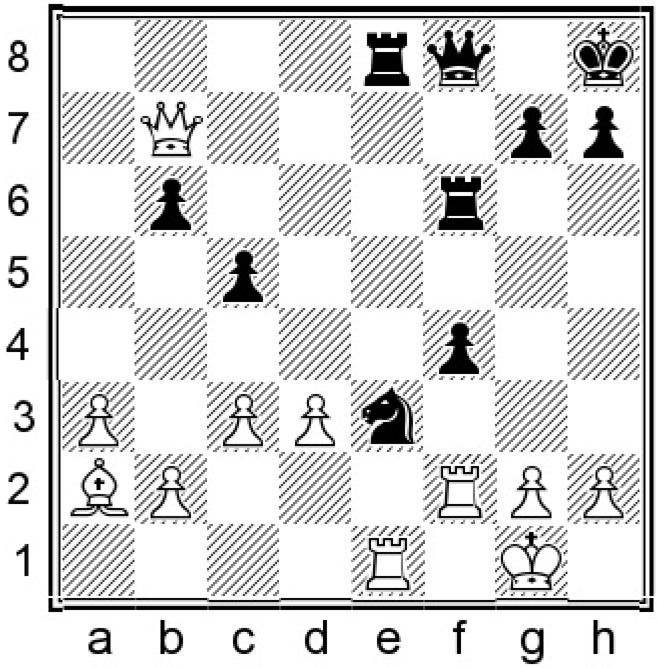
23...♘xd3? would leave Black a pawn up but White would get counterplay with 24.♖cd1!, when it wouldn't be wise to play 24...♘xb2 25.♗b1 g6 26.♖xd8 ♕xd8 27.♕e2 ♘a4 28.♖d1 followed by ♖d7, and Black's attack has evaporated. White is very active, and the pawns are almost unimportant here.

Magnus played a stronger move. The knight will go to e3 where it will be tremendously effective helping the black attack.

24.♖ce1 ♘e3 25.♖f2 ♖e8

Instead of defending the b-pawn with 25...♖d7 Carlsen continues with his offensive.

26.♕xb7



Exercise: What did Carlsen play now?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

26...g5!

This is a key move in Black's strategy. The knight on e3 and the pawn on f4 completely tie up White's rooks, and the bishop on a2, although optically active, is not helping in the defence.

"White's position might look sufficiently solid, but the march of the g-pawn drastically changes that. White's position is actually so bad that there is nothing he can do, and Svidler decides to literally do that, going back and forth." (Nielsen).

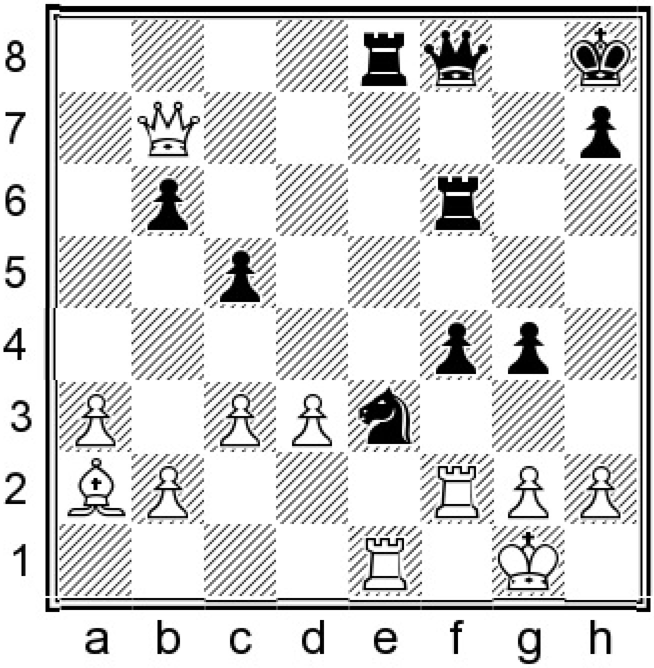
27.♖fe2

Just a waiting move, not very useful, but as Nielsen said, there was nothing that could resist more.

27...g4

Continuing with the idea. 27...f3! was also strong.

28.♖f2



Exercise: How did Carlsen bring the white position to the brink of defeat?

Show/Hide Solution

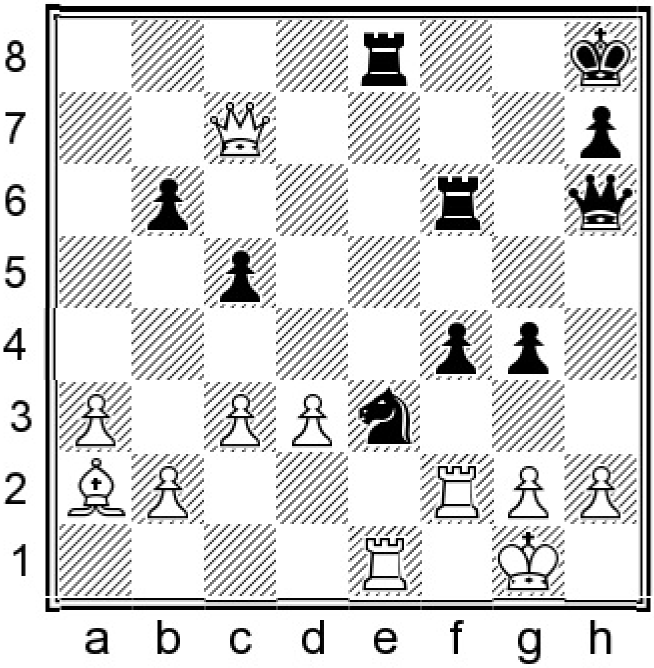
Answer:

28...♕h6!

The queen improves her position, threatening 29...g3 and mate on h2.

29.♕c7

White indirectly defends the g3 square.



Exercise: How did Carlsen respond?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

29...♖ef8!

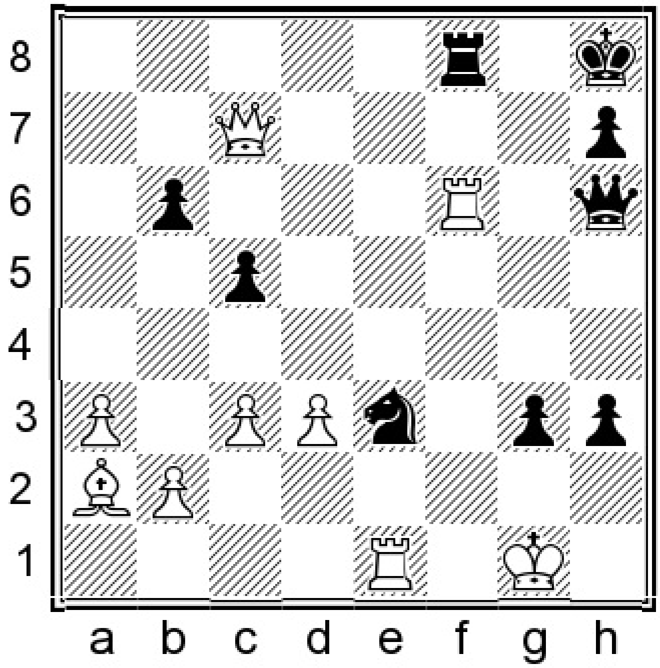
Renewing the threat of 30.-- 30...g3, as after 31.hxg3 he has 31...♘g4, because the e8–rook is no longer hanging.

Curiously, the engines prefer to place the other rook on f8, but this is the “human” move, also approved by the engines.

30.h3

White is lost. There is no defence against the advance 30...g3, so he decided to allow a spectacular finish.

30...gxh3 31.g3 fxg3 32.♖xf6!?



Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen finish off the game?

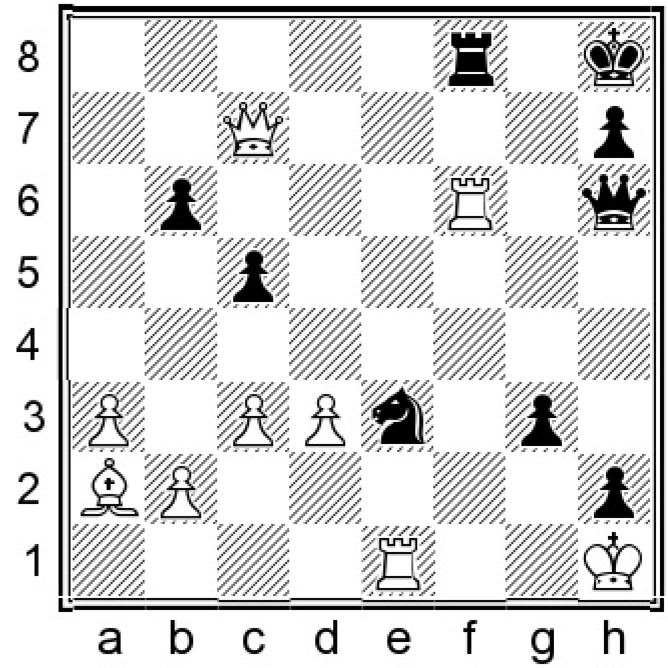
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

32...h2+!

Delivering a simple mate instead of automatically playing the also winning 32...♕xf6? (after 33.♕xg3 c4! Black has a mating attack).

33.♔h1



With a smile, emulating Bent Larsen against Miguel Najdorf in Lugano 1968.

Najdorf delivered a mating combination offering up his two rooks. Larsen continued to the mate and even said “Muy bonito, muy bonito” (Very nice, very nice), according to Najdorf.

33...g2#

Also with a smile.

0–1

“It was a very nice game for me,” said Carlsen. “I think he sort of misplayed it early on and then he missed this 20...♕f8 move, and after that play just flows; I get ...♘e3, ...g5. It was certainly a fun game today but I don’t expect to win like this every game. But the last few rounds have been great!”

He said the game of the previous round gave him a lot of confidence (our game 28 from the previous book, against Aronian).

Svidler said “Magnus played very well, but I could have played it better. It’s possible to ask more questions than I have asked today.”

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) “Appearances can be deceptive”. A position apparently slightly better also requires attention to tactics. (13.a3? 19.f4?).

2.) “Invite everybody to the party!” (12...♔h8! 13...f5! 20...♕f8! 26...g5! 28...♕h6!).

3.) “If one piece stands badly, the whole position is bad.” (17.♗a2?).

4.) Passive positions should generally be avoided, even if some small sacrifices are necessary. (*22.♕g5!*).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 26
Anish Giri – Magnus Carlsen
Sicilian Defence [B30]
Zagreb (1), 26.06.2019

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 e6

Carlsen changes from 3...g6. Later he alternated between 3...e6 and 3...g6, but in 2020 he played the unusual 3...e5 in blitz and rapid games several times and once even 3...h5, which looks crazy, but Carlsen has said he has a serious file on the move, albeit nothing against 4.h3, the answer Ding Liren chose.

4.♗xc6 bxc6 5.d3 ♘e7

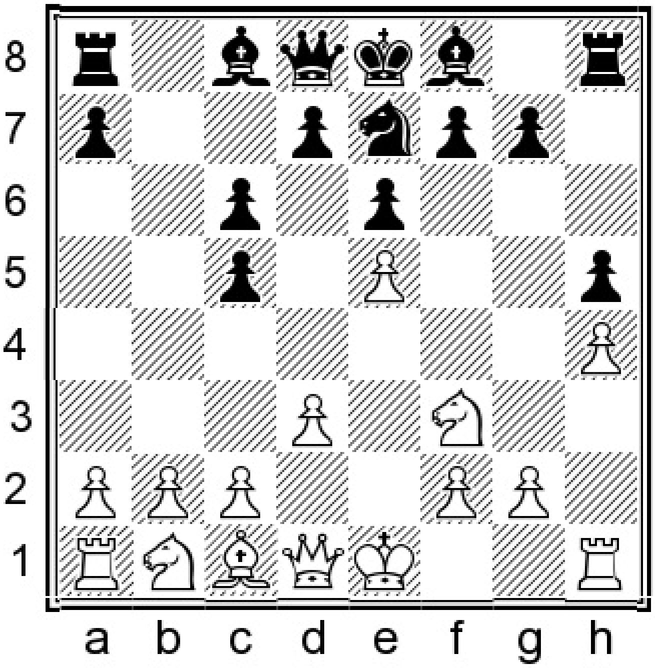
The knight heads for g6 to try to arrive at Black's ideal structure: to play the move ...e5 in good conditions, gaining space and opening a nice diagonal for his c8-bishop. But of course White will take measures to counter it.

6.h4

White wants to weaken the black kingside if Black plays ...♘g6, but naturally White's position also leaves unprotected squares. 6.♘g5 and 6.♕e2 are the principal alternatives, although h4 may also be played later in some lines.

6...h5 7.e5

This had been played before on various occasions. Black usually tries to get rid of the e5-pawn to gain space for his pieces, generally playing ...f6 at the right moment.



Black's structure is not the best, but he can create a strong centre and activate his c8-bishop. If he succeeds in that, then the weaknesses may not be so important.

7...d6

Question: What a surprise! It looks like a beginner's move. The pawn structure is damaged forever. What is the explanation?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Right, this is a very surprising move; the usual moves are 7...♘g6, 7...♘f5 and 7...f6.

It came as inspiration over the board and required a lot of courage and self-confidence.

Here is Carlsen's explanation: "I must admit that I simply didn't know the position very well. I only knew that 7...f6 was the main move, but I assumed he was kind of prepared for that. 7...d6 was really a case of just playing the man instead of the position.

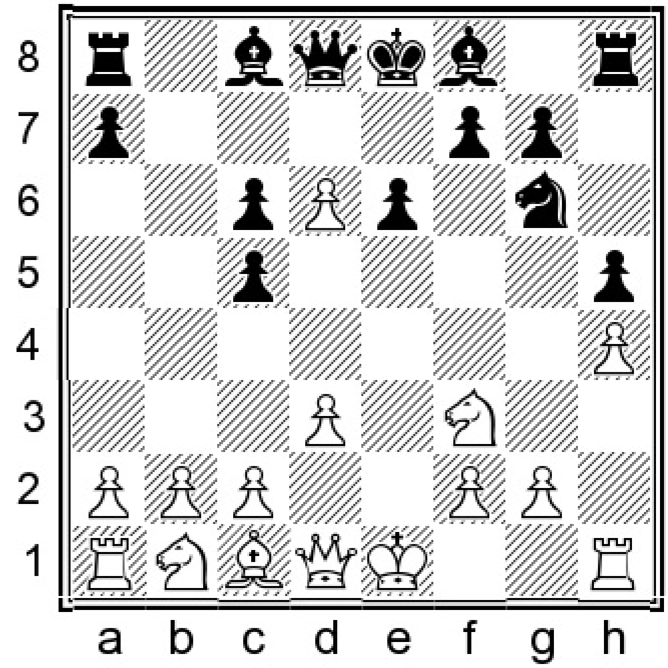
I thought that ...d6 was such a stupid move that he wouldn't have looked at it, and I felt that the resulting positions were just completely unclear.

It was not at all obvious that they were bad for me, so I thought that would be a very good thing for me, just to get him out of book and to get an unclear position from the get-go. As the game showed, it proved to be a good strategy."

8.exd6 ♘g6

7...d6 was tested only once before and after (as of August 2020). Motylev – Fedorov, Batumi 2018, continued 8...♘f5, when there are several choices for White. One big question is where to place his knights: c4 and e4 look like reasonable squares and the game continued 9.♘bd2 ♗xd6 10.b3 ♗e7 11.♗b2 f6 12.♕e2 e5. Black hence obtained what he wanted, paying the expected price of a weak pawn structure.

By placing the knight on g6, although further from d4, he attacks the h4-pawn and also reinforces e5. Finally, a possible jump to f4 should be taken into consideration by White.



9.♘fd2

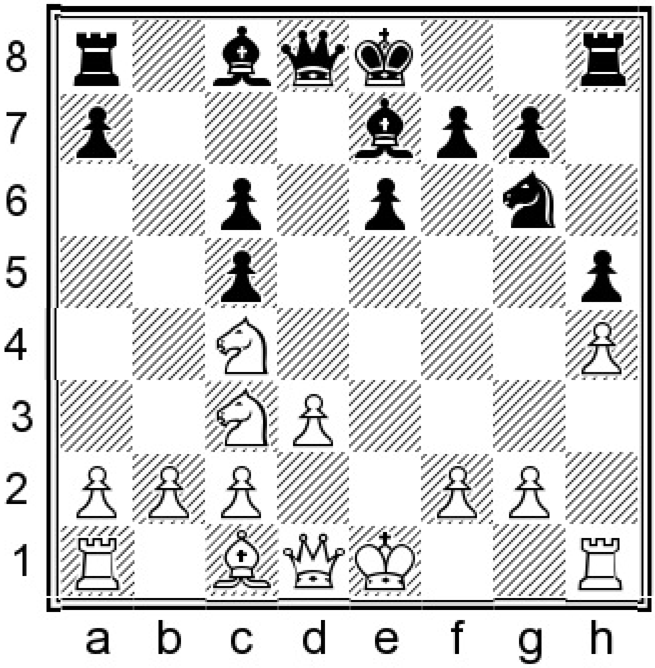
Giri thought for almost 40 minutes over this and the next move. He chose a setup with his knights on c3 and c4.

9.♘bd2 ♗xd6 10.♘c4 was also a logical alternative. White could try later ♘fd2-e4 and the game could continue 10...♗e7 11.♕e2. Here 11...♘xh4? 12.♘xh4 ♗xh4 is bad due to 13.♗f4! with a strong attack. It threatens 14.♘d6+ and also intends castling long. For example, after 13...g6 White can continue 14.♗e5 ♖h7 15.0-0-0 with a clear advantage, though the engines show a stronger way: 14.♘d6+ ♔f8 15.♖xh4! ♕xh4 16.♕e5 f6 17.♕e4 with a winning attack.

11...f6 is answered with 12.♕e4 winning a pawn, so it would be better to choose 11...♕d5, when the game could continue 12.b3 f6 13.g3 e5 14.♘e3 followed by ♗b2.

9...♗xd6 10.♘c4 ♗e7 11.♘c3

The engines like 11.g3 first and then White has to decide where to develop the knight. However, White doesn’t need to make this move immediately, since an exchange of h-pawns would suit him.



Exercise: Giri said he missed the next move. What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

11...♗a6!

It was after this move that Giri felt things were beginning to go wrong.

Question: I understand this is surprising. Black is not playing for ...e5 as we saw, but it doesn't look so terrible for White. Why did he feel like that?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Giri said: "I missed ...♗a6 and then suddenly it's huge. After this already I have to allow something that I don't want."

Carlsen later commented: "I'm trying to play enterprisingly and I really think he was kicking himself pretty early on in the opening for not playing some positional, quiet line instead, because I felt like pretty early on we were getting a dogfight and that was always going to be good for me!"

12.♕f3

Black was threatening to take on c4, exchange queens and capture the h4 pawn.

Among the continuations Giri didn't like was to allow the ending after 12.g3 ♗xc4 13.dxc4 ♕xd1+

14.♘xd1, where after the change in the structure Black could even finish a virtual pawn up.

White could play 12.♗d2, avoiding the loss of the pawn, followed by ♕e2, and there is nothing wrong. But, anyway, what Giri played is not bad either, but he is entering terrain that he didn't like.

So, it is clear after what both players commented that, again, "Chess is a state of mind": the objective evaluation of the position is almost always the most important thing, but many times, like here, how one feels about the position may have a strong impact on the quality of the moves at critical moments.

12...♗xc4 13.♕xc6+ ♔f8 14.dxc4 ♘xh4

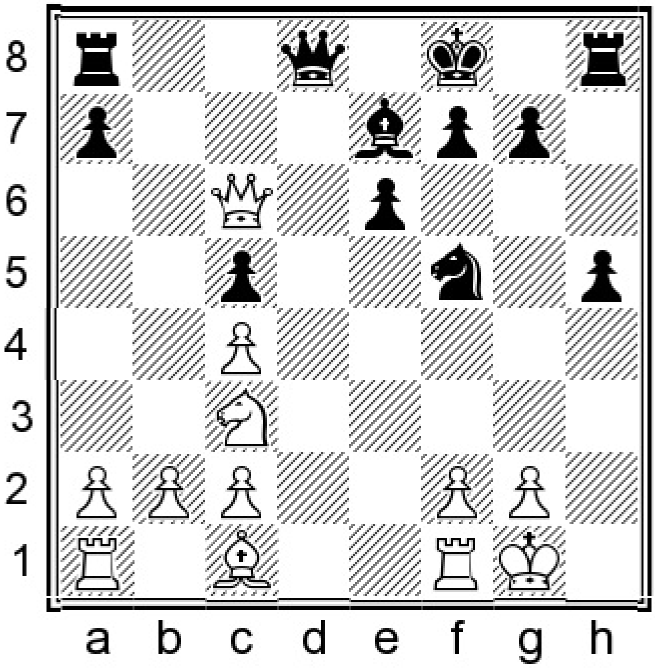
Black cannot complain about the exchange of pawns. His doubled pawn has disappeared and now Black has a strong kingside pawn majority, four against two. Besides, the endings are now favourable in many cases, and in the middlegame his king is not suffering on f8.

15.0-0

An important decision. White is not afraid of the black pawn majority, which looks reasonable, as Black has no attacking pieces on the kingside yet. However, it obliges White to be careful in the near future, because the scenario may change.

15.♗d2 also deserves consideration, to create the chance of queenside castling.

15...♘f5



White is still fine, but now the collapse begins.

16.♘e2?

A passive move that gives Black the advantage. It was criticised by everybody, beginning with Giri himself: “Maybe this move ♘e2 was the pivotal moment, because you should play a little more actively, the pieces should go forwards not backwards.”

Carlsen explained more: “I think it was very much about this move ♘e2, which I felt was really, really poor. He has to develop his pieces somehow. My whole idea was obviously a bit of a bluff. I didn’t know whether it would be good for me or not, but it looked interesting, and a little spooky for him, since he’s always kind of getting mated, but you cannot play a move like ♘e2, since my positional and attacking trumps are so huge anyway. You have to take the fight.”

Kasparov was also critical and added a general evaluation of both players: “The move ♘e2 – he wants to play ...♘d4, let me play ♘e2 – but that’s not the way to play! Magnus sees the whole board, while even players of Giri’s calibre can see just a fragment of the board... He failed, he failed miserably, and Magnus was quick on the spot with animal instincts – he spotted this weakness, he could smell the blood and he went for the kill.”

Question: I get it, it was a poor move but what should he play?

Show/Hide Solution

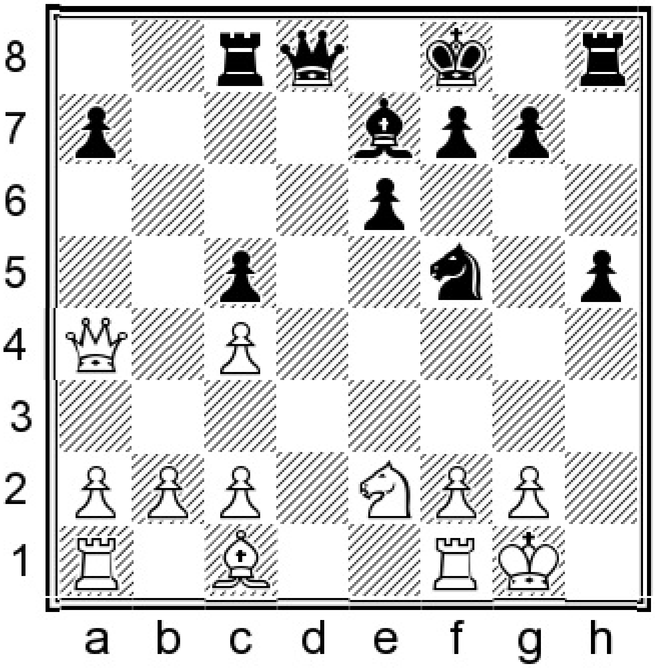
Answer: Carlsen gave two suggestions for White after the game, and both hold the position. 16.♖d1 ♘d4 17.♕e4 f5 18.♕d3 was one, and he mentioned 16.♗e3 too. The position is strange, atypical, and also balanced.

16...♖c8 17.♕a4?

Not a prudent retreat. The queen attacks a7, but she will need more time to get back to the centre.

It was necessary to play 17.♕e4, keeping the queen closer to the action, although Black has better chances after e.g. 17...g5, and a storm is coming on the kingside.

After 17.♕a4 Black has several attractive options. Carlsen played the most “human” move.



Exercise: What did he choose?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

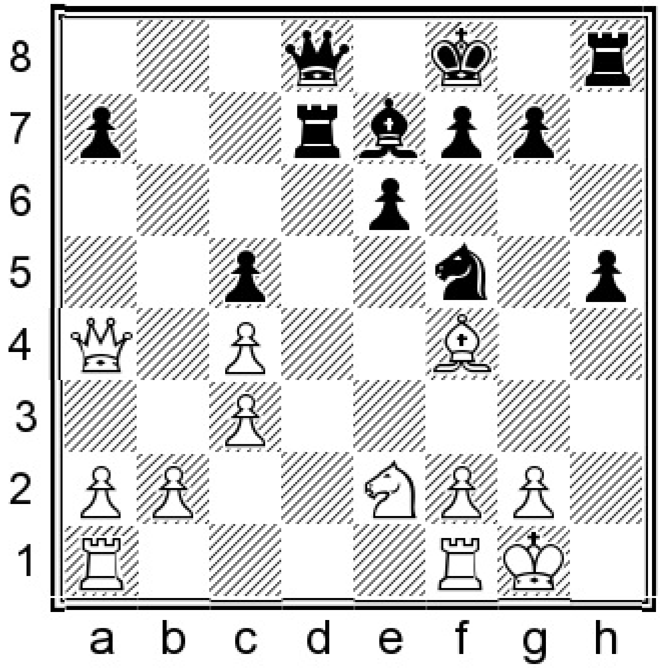
17...♖c7!

He activated the rook. It defends the pawn and is ready to move to d7, dominating the d-file. Black had more aggressive options such as 17...h4, but it is not necessary to rush. From a practical point of view it is better to activate as many forces as possible.

18.♗f4 ♖d7 19.c3?

White wants to challenge Black’s control of the d-file and wants to bring his queen back. That is very logical, but it gives Black even more time.

The sad 19.♘g3 was necessary, allowing 19...♘d4. It was a very difficult decision to take at the board after playing 16.♘e2 to prevent it; besides, Black could also play 19...♘xg3 followed by ...h4 with good attacking chances, but this is still better than what happens in the game.



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

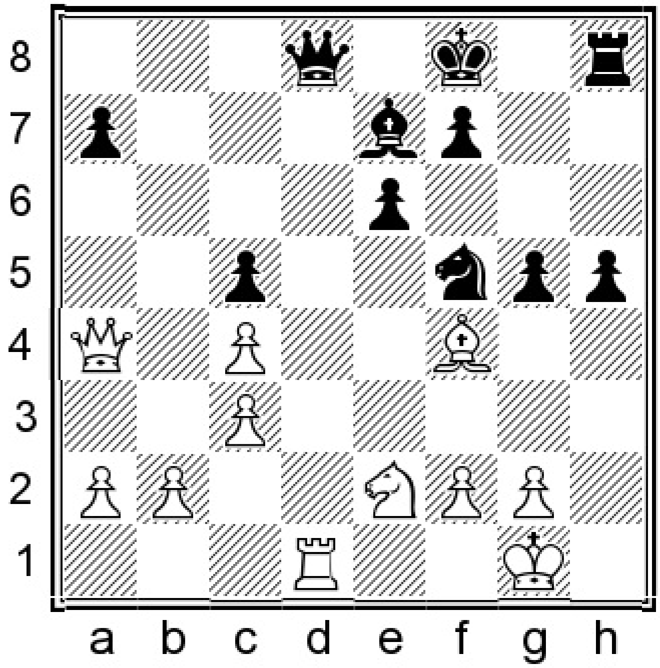
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

19...g5!

Even if Black’s pieces are not particularly aggressive at first sight, this move begins the final assault.

20.♖ad1 ♖xd1 21.♖xd1



Exercise: How did Carlsen strengthen his attack?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21...♕a8!

Giri: “I blundered this move 21...♕a8! and suddenly I’m just dead lost...It’s ok to misplay things, but not to lose in 5 moves.”

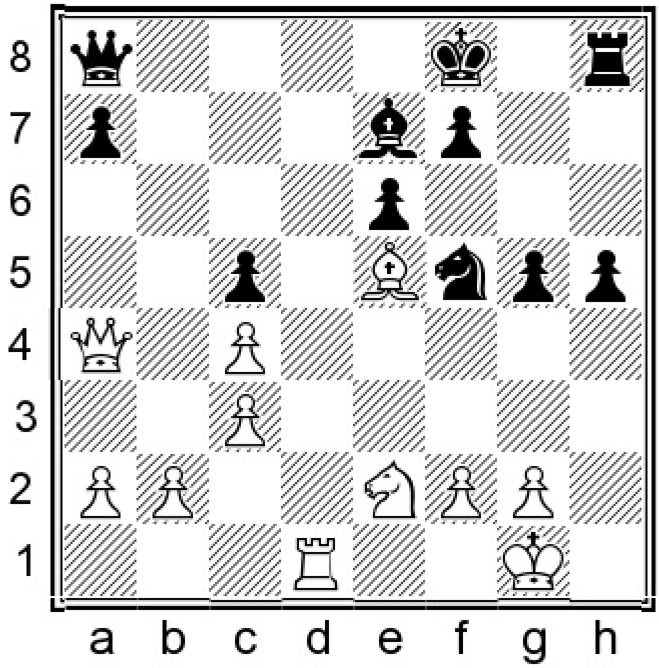
Question: Really? Is such a move like this, putting the queen in a corner, so strong?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The world champion answers: “To me it was very, very clear that once I saw this move ...♕a8 everything just comes together. His knight on e2 is obviously horrible and the knight on f5 is beautiful and his king just has no protection, his queen is out of play on a4 and everything just works for me. Clearly, he missed something. As he said he missed ...♕a8, but it seemed to me that the way he was playing before that was just very, very dubious and it should be punishable.” (Carlsen).

22.♗c7

Both Giri and Carlsen mentioned the alternative 22.♗e5.

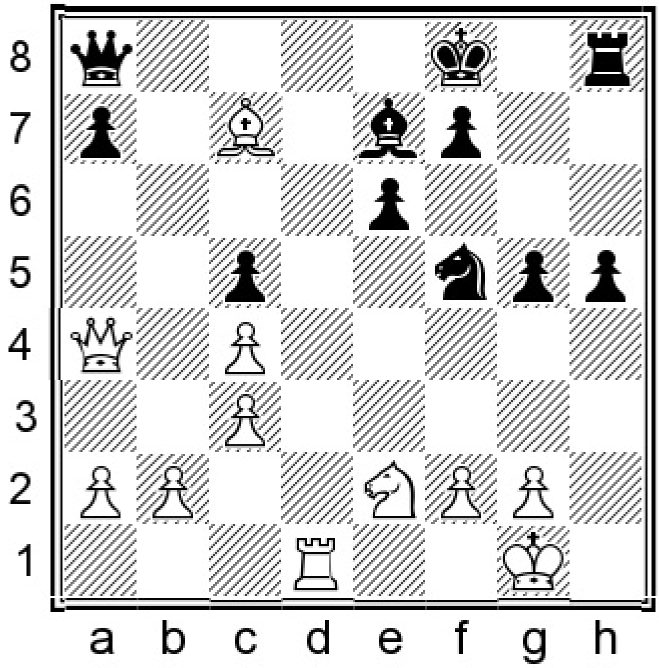


Exercise: What is the refutation both players pointed out?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Not 22...♘h4? 23.f3 and the attack disappears, and if the rook goes to g8 then 24.♖d7 is crushing, while if 23...f6 then 24.♗d6 follows and White is almost winning. Black should give perpetual check with e.g. 23...♘xf3+.

The winning move is the beautiful 22...♕e4!, giving up the rook. After 23.♗xh8 ♘h4 24.f3 ♕xe2 there's no defence.



Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen continue his attack?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

22...h4

White can't stop the devastating 23...h3; here, 22...♘h4 23.f3 g4 was also winning,

23.f3 h3

0–1

Carlsen decided to play a surprising move in the opening, which he described as "stupid" but which was in Laskerian style. He wanted to face his opponent, rather than his preparation.

Giri sank into a deep think and went astray quickly when he played passively and abandoned his kingside, moving his queen to the queenside. The mating attack was so devastating that Giri resigned after only 23 moves.

In reference to Magnus's definition of his whole idea being "a bit of a bluff", Garry Kasparov, who said he'd talked about similar positions with the Norwegian when they worked together a decade earlier, commented: "It was nice for Magnus to say that, but it's not about bluffing, it's about better understanding the game of chess!.... Basically, what Magnus did is just – translating his joke into a serious statement – is that he created a position that was highly-unbalanced.....

"Before he attacked, he created conditions for that attack. He created conditions for the attack because Giri couldn't play this unbalanced position, so his greatest decision was actually to play ...d6, to go for this unbalanced position which machines didn't like for Black, but again, he was not fighting the machine, he was playing another human."

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) A healthier pawn structure generally gives an advantage, but not always, if there are other relevant factors, such as the two bishops, a strong centre, and, of course, king safety. (7...d6!).

2.) Play the opponent or play the position? There is no clear answer. It depends both on the position and the opponent. (7...d6!).

3.) Atypical positions may require atypical moves and plans, too. (11...♗a6!).

4.) Avoid a passive position! (16.♘e2? 17.♕a4?).

5.) King safety is the most important factor in the position most of the time. (17.♕a4? *17.♕e4!* 19.c3? *19.♘g3!* 19...g5! 21...♕a8!).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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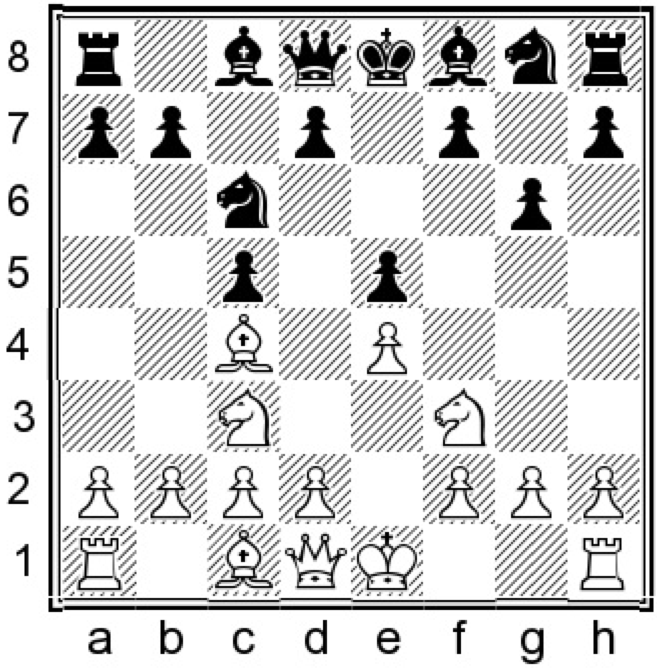
Game 27

Ian Nepomniachtchi – Magnus Carlsen

Sicilian Defence [B30]

Zagreb (7), 03.07.2019

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘c3 e5 4.♗c4 g6



In this version of the Botvinnik system with Black, Black would ideally continue with typical moves of the system ...♗g7, ...♘ge7, probably ...h6, and prepare ...f5 with ...♔h8

Black would be fine in that case, but of course White will try to avoid it.

5.d3

The immediate 5.h4 was played in Vachier-Lagrave – Carlsen, Sinquefield Cup 2018, threatening 6.h5. Carlsen answered 5...h6; it’s interesting to see a little more how that game continued: 6.h5 g5 7.♘h2 ♘f6 8.d3 d6 9.♘f1 ♗g4 10.f3 ♗e6. Later, White played g4, the position was equal, and although Carlsen tried, he couldn’t unbalance the position.

Exercise: How did Carlsen reply to 5.d3?

Show/Hide Solution

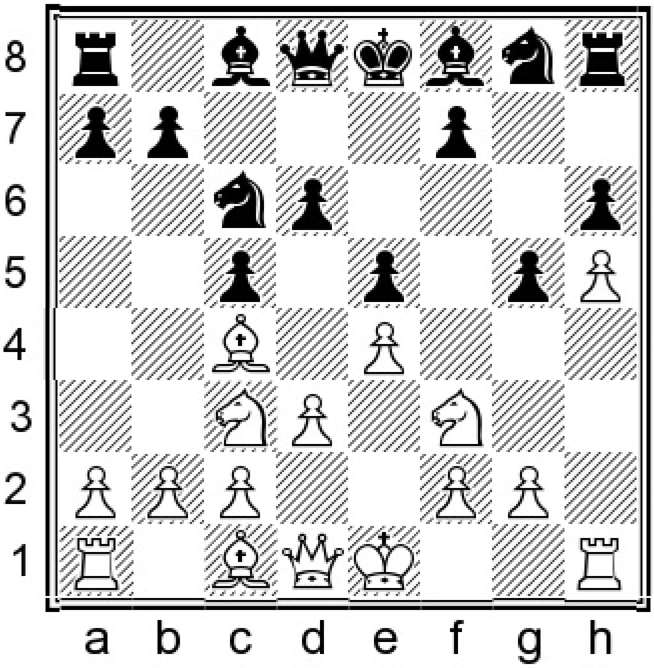
Answer:

5...h6

The threat 6.♘g5 more or less forced this move, but, as we know, it is not really a tempo lost, as it is in Black's plan, and White has no way to exploit his advantage in development as the position is closed.

In Gulko – Hartoch, Sombor 1974, Black played 5...♗g7?!, ignoring the threat, but after 6.♘g5! ♘h6 7.f4 Black was already in trouble. They continued 7...f6 8.0-0 exf4 9.♘f3 ♘e5 10.♗xf4 d6 11.♘xe5 dxe5 12.♗e3 ♕d6 13.♘d5, and Black is almost lost, 1–0 in 27 moves.

6.h4 d6 7.h5 g5



Question: I understand that Black accepted the hole on d5, it's part of the system, but f5 is now also undefended. Isn't that too much?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Let's see what the world champion thinks: "Basically, all I can say is that it looks worse for Black than it is," and he highlighted a positive psychological factor: "There's something nice about being positionally worse out of the opening – that at least in this case all the holes are already there, so you don't have to worry about concessions because you already made concessions. It's about me trying to get counterplay."

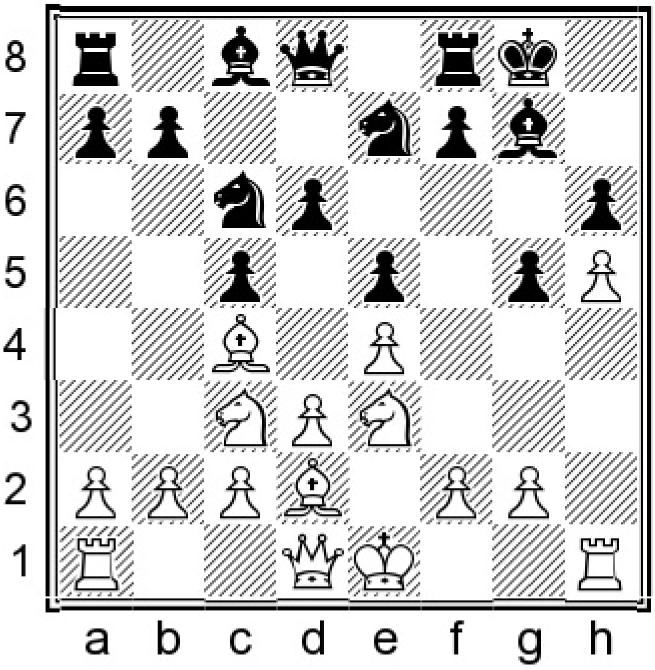
8.♘h2 ♗g7

After 8...f5 9.exf5 ♗xf5 10.♘f1 followed by ♘e3 the opening of the position only favours White. Black must wait for a more favourable moment to try ...f5, while 8...♘f6 would transpose to the Vachier-Lagrave – Carlsen game already mentioned.

9.♘g4 ♘ge7 10.♘e3 0-0

In this type of position 10...♗e6 is generally not a good developing move. It doesn't threaten to take on c4, and play could continue 11.♘cd5, with a dominant knight, as it can't be exchanged with ...♘xd5 in view of the fork.

11.♗d2



Exercise: What did Carlsen play here?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

11...♔h8

Now Black is ready to play ...f5.

12.g4

White prevents it, and there are very few breaks now available. Nonetheless, despite the closed nature of the position, Nepomniachtchi continues to play for a win.

One important factor began to emerge: White was consuming too much time.

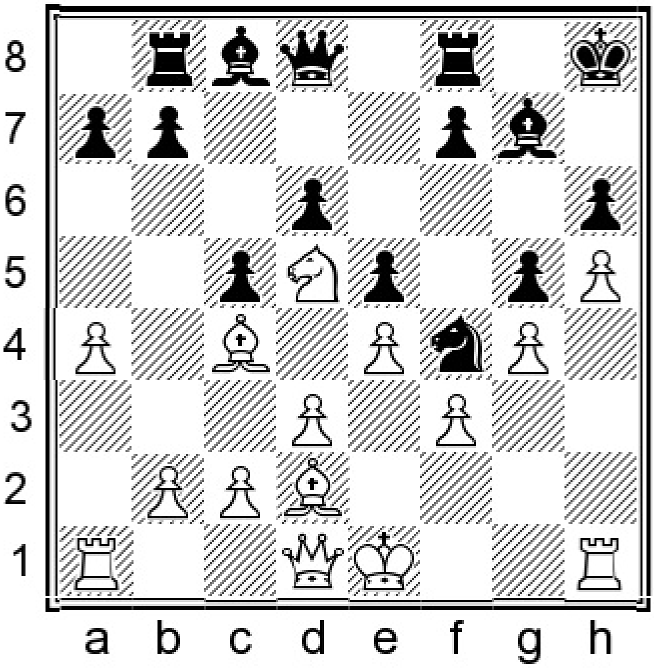
12...♖b8 13.a4

White also impedes Black's intention of progressing on the queenside, but the question as to where his king will go remains unclear.

13...♘d4

Black has weak squares, but his knight begins his slow trip to the square abandoned by White with 12.g4.

14.♘cd5 ♘xd5 15.♘xd5 ♘e6 16.f3 ♘f4



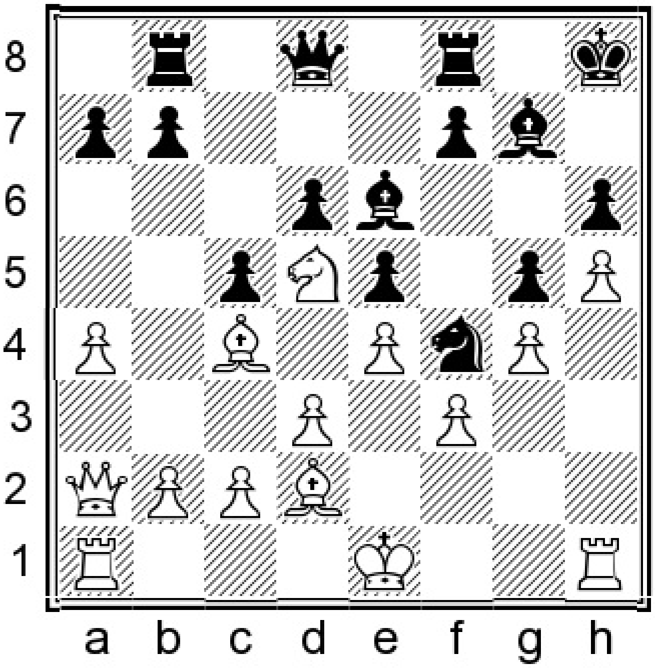
17.♕b1

Question: It seems a really odd move to me. What is the idea?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: The closed nature of the position allows this unusual manoeuvre. The queen moves to a2 to strength control of d5, in order always to retake with a piece if Black exchanges both minor pieces on d5.

17...♗e6 18.♕a2



Question: White has got what he wanted, so what is the evaluation of the position?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: “He went for a very ambitious plan with the queen to a2 and so on. The problem, of course, is that his king lacks shelter, so the opening of the position is always going to be good for me.” (Carlsen).

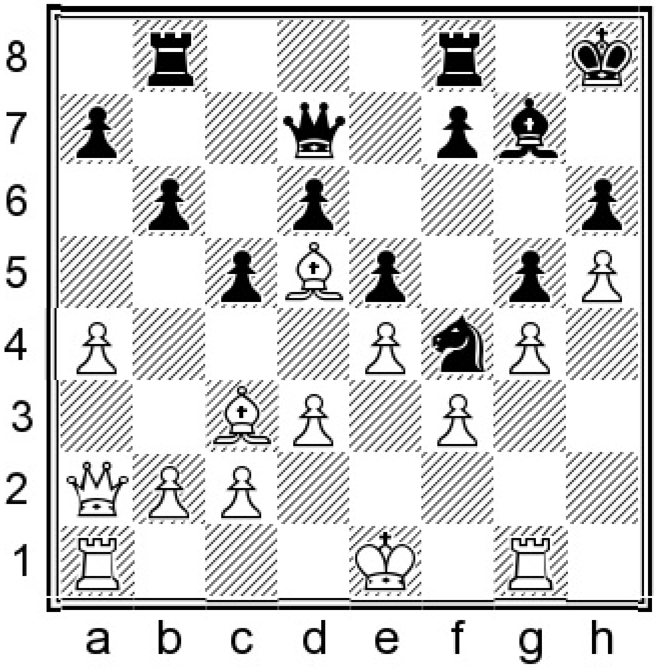
18...♕d7 19.♖g1

The white king has no clear destiny, so it is safer to avoid any combinations based on ...♗xg4.

19...b6 20.♗c3 ♗xd5

This bishop is less important than the f4-knight; of course, whenever White takes on f4 the g7-bishop enters the game after ...exf4.

21.♗xd5



Exercise: There is not much life in the position. How did Carlsen try to create some tension?

Show/Hide Solution

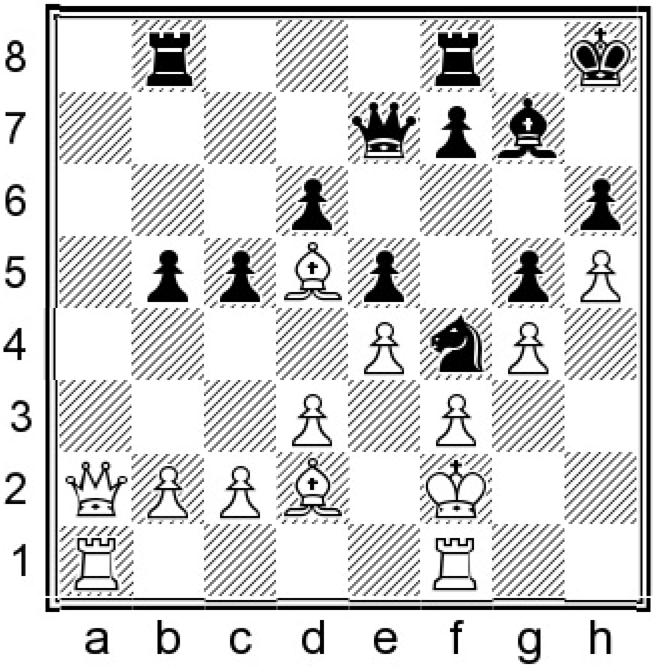
Answer:

21...a6

This is the only chance: Black is preparing ...b5.

22.♗d2 ♕e7 23.♖f1 b5 24.axb5 axb5 25.♔f2

Black has got something, but the white king is apparently safe. Black has only one active piece and there are no open lines.



Exercise: How did Carlsen add more tension?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

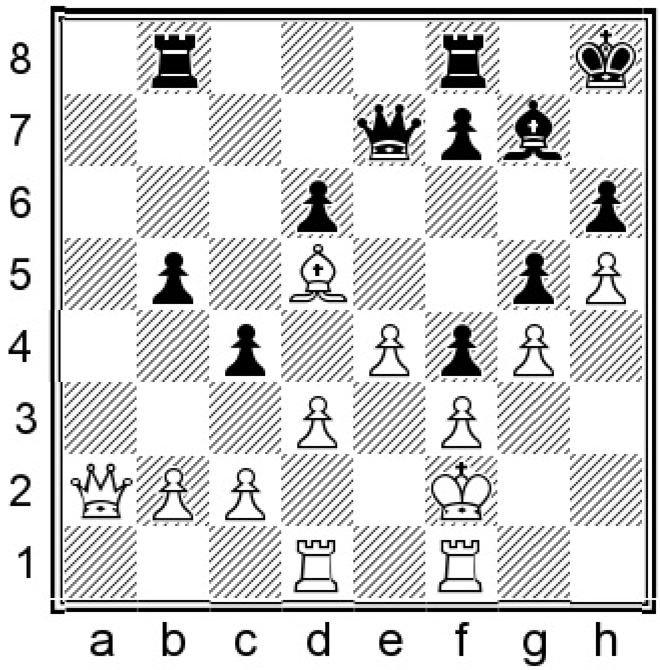
25...c4!

An unpleasant move to encounter in time trouble. Black threatens not only the d3-pawn, but also 26.-- 26...♘xd5 27.exd5 f5!

26.♗xf4

Not a pleasant decision, but accepting the pawn sacrifice would open up the position, which is dangerous for the white king. After 26.dxc4 bxc4 27.♗xc4 Black can open the position even more playing 27...f5!. White is then the only side at risk due to his exposed king.

26...exf4 27.♖ad1



Carlsen said that Nepomniachtchi “spent so much time!” and he “got very excited” when the position started to open up around these moves.

Exercise: What did Carlsen play?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

27...f5!

This move shocked his opponent, who was in time trouble.

“I just went for it. I wasn’t sure if it was great, but he was short on time. It didn’t look like I was risking too much,” said Carlsen, and added “If I’d thought for longer, I wouldn’t have played ...f5, and the game would probably have been a draw.”

Magnus also called the move “a bit silly” and an “accidental bluff”, but it turned out to be the winning move.

28.gxf5??

Nepomniachtchi played this losing move too quickly. “Sometimes you are lucky,” said Carlsen.

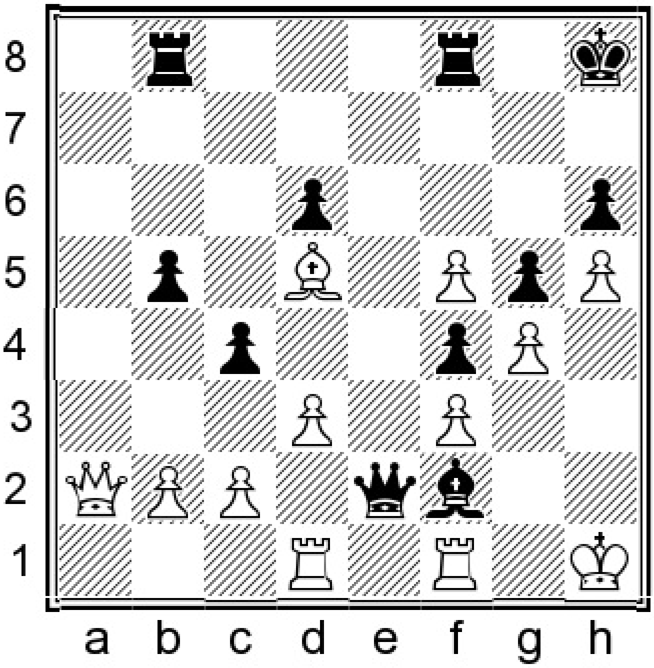
Apparently, both players arrived at the same conclusion in the tension of the game, with few minutes at their disposal.

They both believed that 28.exf5! also loses, missing that after 28...♗d4+ 29.♔g2 ♕e2+ the king could simply go to h3. After 30.♔h3 Black can’t create any threats and the king is safe on h3. Black can hold the position playing 30...♖fe8, and the game would almost certainly end in a draw, after e.g. 31.b4 cxd3

32.cxd3 ♖bc8, when White's extra pawn is useless.

During the post-game interview, Carlsen also discovered that the white king can move to h1 and wouldn't be mated as he thought.

Carlsen pointed out after the game the saving line after 28.exf5 ♗d4+ 29.♔g2 ♕e2+ 30.♔h1 ♗f2

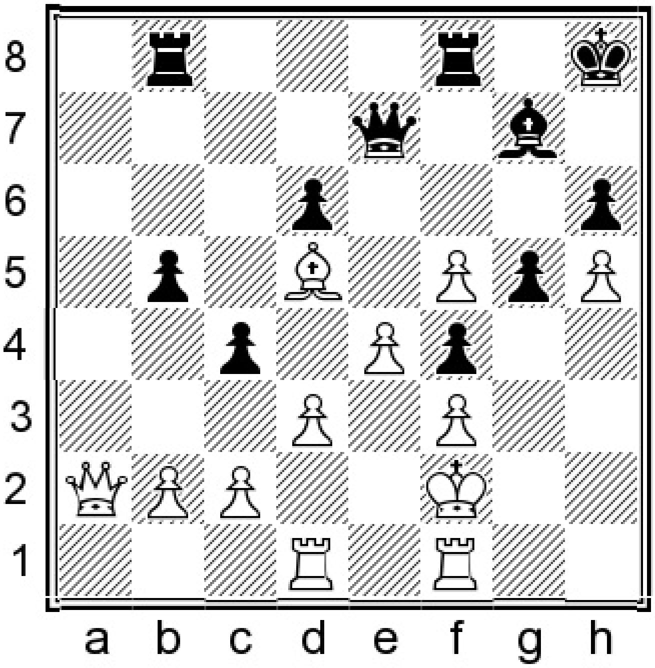


Exercise: What defence did Carlsen see?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: White has 31.♕a1!. Black maintains equality by playing 31...♖be8 (or the other rook to e8) 32.b3+ ♖e5, and the position is balanced.

But not the intended 31...♗g3??, which probably even loses because the white queen arrives in time after 32.b3+ ♔h7 (or 32...c3 33.♕xc3+ ♔h7 34.♕d2) 33.♕a7+! and 34.♕g1, a pawn up and with a much better ending.



Exercise (easy): Now “Chess is easy again” (Najdorf). How?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

28...g4

As simple as it looks. The black queen reaches the kingside and Black is winning.

29.d4

There is no defence. If 29.fxg4 the attack is unstoppable after 29...♕h4+ 30.♔e2 ♗d4.

29...♕h4+ 30.♔e2 ♕h2+ 31.♖f2 gxf3+

Black resigned because 32.♔xf3 loses a rook after 32...♕xh5+, while if 32.♔e1 then 32...♕g1+.

0–1

The first victory obtained by Carlsen against Nepomniachtchi in classical games was a surprise.

The players were out of book quickly in a locked position where it was difficult to obtain objective or even practical chances to complicate the game.

Nepomniachtchi, who generally plays rapidly, was seemingly uncomfortable as his time usage was poor; the world champion, helped by his opponent’s time trouble, was finally able to complicate the game. He went for a pawn break, sacrificing a pawn on the queenside, followed by another break on the kingside. It was not enough to win, but Nepomniachtchi immediately collapsed.

Carlsen himself was surprised by his results in 2019. He said: “I’m trying to play positions that they’re less familiar with, and it’s definitely a strategy of mine to play for the attack, but it’s a bit extreme how often it actually is working these days!”

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) A weakness is only real if it’s possible to take advantage of it. (The squares d5 and f5 favoured White, but they did not lead to anything better than f4, which was occupied by a black knight).

2.) In time trouble, unexpected continuations provide practical chances and can even be lethal. (25...c4! 27...f5!).

3.) Avoid time trouble! (28.gxf5?? *28.exf5!*).

4.) “Long” moves are difficult to anticipate. (*31.♕a1! 33.♕a7+! 34.♕g1! (see the note to move 28 for all of these moves)*).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

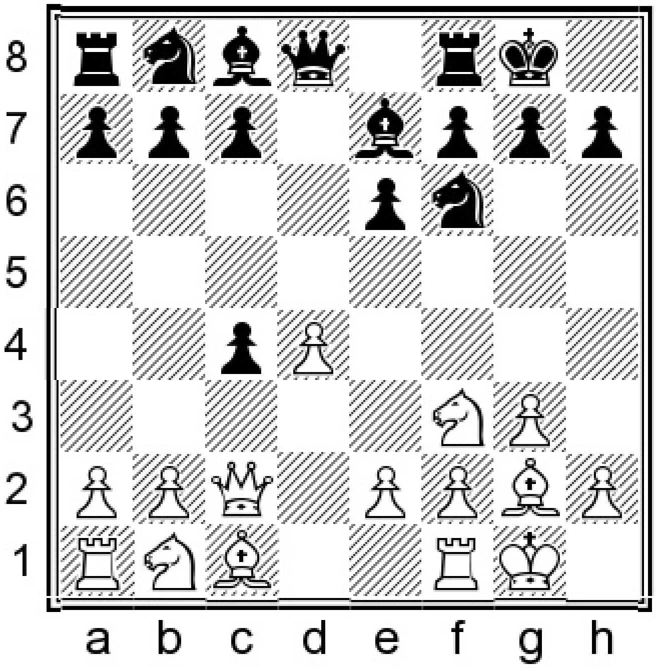
Game 28

Ding Liren – Magnus Carlsen

Catalan Opening [E05]

Zagreb (8), 04.07.2019

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 d5 4.g3 ♗e7 5.♗g2 0-0 6.0-0 dxc4 7.♕c2



7...b5

Question: This is somewhat unexpected from a classical player like Magnus, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Until recently, 7...a6 was practically the only move played, but recently new moves have appeared, such as 7...b6, 7...c6 and the move chosen by the world champion.

Not a classical move? It's hard to tell; chess has changed a lot since computers became an essential part of preparation. New moves that were "unthinkable" 10 or 15 years ago are now possible, because they cannot be refuted tactically.

This move is one of them. Black is not afraid of the Catalan bishop and weakens his diagonal knowing it cannot be punished.

8.a4

The immediate 8.♘e5 delivers nothing after 8...c6! Then 9.a4?! is weak due to 9...♘d5!

The move chosen forces a new weakening in the black structure.

8...b4 9.♘fd2

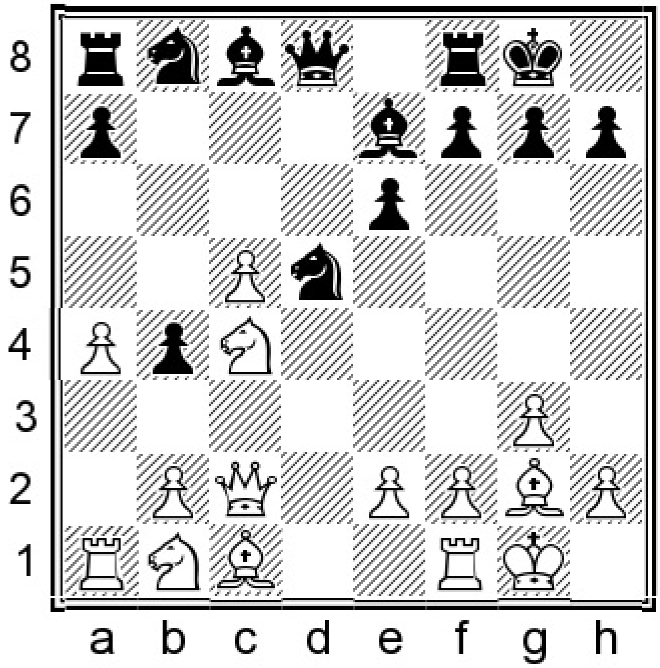
White has several options; this is considered the most critical move even by the engines.

Now 9.♘e5 is answered by 9...♕xd4!, which gives Black good compensation for the exchange.

9...♘d5

This is unusual. The main line is 9...c6 10.♘xc4 ♕xd4 11.♖d1 and White has enough compensation for the pawn.

10.♘xc4 c5 11.dxc5



Here Black used to play 11...♗xc5.

11...♗a6!

Question: What an odd move! Why is it so good?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Maybe objectively it is not that strong, but at the board it was a very good move, because the combination of the last two black moves had never been seen before.

It was analysed at home by Carlsen, but, as we will see, not by Ding Liren. The engines slightly prefer White, but Ding knew he'd fallen into an opening trap.

Magnus confirmed that after the game: "Yeah, it was one of the unused ideas from the match, I suppose. [The World Championship against Caruana in 2018.] It becomes very, very critical."

"It is indeed typical 'computer' chess where one pushes the position to its absolute maximum relying on tactics." (Nielsen).

12.♘e3

At the board, Ding had a difficult task. He spent 20 minutes on 11.dxc5 and another 18 on 12.♘e3, which, more than one year later, is the best move according to the computer.

Magnus described Ding's chosen path as "a very decent line," but even with the c-pawn reaching c7, it was a nightmare for White to play unprepared.

White has several ideas that look tempting. Some of them were tried during 2020 in online tournaments, but we can say that Black didn't suffer much.

12.♖d1 ♘d7 was played several times. Now it is not advisable for White to play quietly, for example after 13.b3? (played once) 13...♖c8 14.♗b2 ♘xc5 15.♘bd2 ♗f6 Black was already better.

It is better to keep the c-pawn for a while. White has tried 13.e4 ♘5f6 14.♗e3, but Black seems to be fine after 14...♕c7.

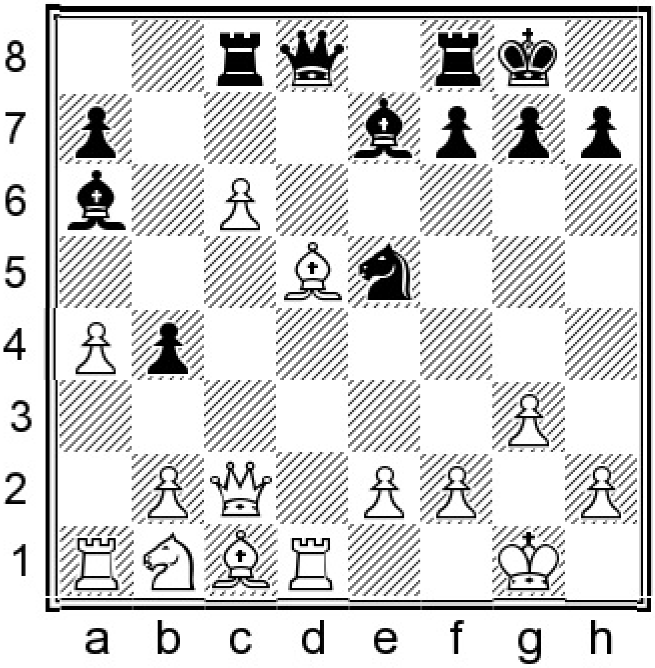
White has also played 13.c6 ♖c8. After 14.♘e3 ♘e5! Black has excellent counterplay according to Nielsen. In Studer – Dubov chess.com INT 2020, White played the riskier 14.♗xd5 exd5 15.♘e3, and after 15...♘f6 16.♘f5 ♖e8 17.♗f4 ♗f8 White could have obtained an advantage playing 18.♘d4!, but instead of 15...♘f6 the engines claim that Black has more than enough compensation for the pawn playing 15...♗b7. After 16.♘xd5 ♗xc6 the light squares belong to Black.

12...♘d7 13.♘xd5 exd5 14.c6

We will see in the next commentary the variation 14.♗xd5 ♖c8 15.c6 ♘e5 16.♖d1, transposing to the line below.

14...♖c8 15.♗f4

"Ding keeps finding good moves," says Nielsen. He then considered the line mentioned before, now reached via 15.♖d1 ♘e5 16.♗xd5



Exercise: What is the best move?

Show/Hide Solution

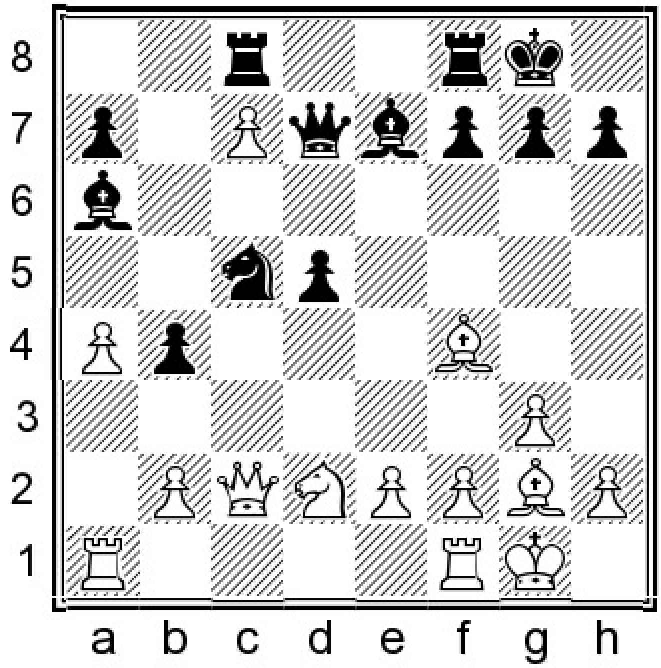
Answer: Black is almost forced to play 16...♘xc6! The queen sacrifice gives excellent compensation after 17.♗xf7+ ♖xf7 18.♖xd8+ ♗xd8. The strong 19...♘d4 is coming and "the computer says White should better try forcing a draw straightaway in order not to be worse.” (Nielsen).

In Song Yuxin – Zhu Jiner, Zibo 2019, played two months later, White tried 17.♕e4?!, but after 17...♔h8! 18.♗f4 ♗f6 19.e3 ♖e8 White had development problems and was already in trouble.

15...♘c5 16.c7

The computer suggests 16.♖d1 d4 17.h4: this was played in Gelfand – Deac, Bucharest 2019. After 17...♖e8 18.♘d2 ♗xe2 19.c7, instead of 19...♕d7? 20.♖dc1 ♘d3 21.♗c6, and White was already winning, Black had to play 19...♖xc7, with a strong pawn for the exchange, and he is still in the game.

16...♕d7 17.♘d2



17...g5!

Question: Now I understand that the line 16.♖d1 d4 17.h4 was played to avoid this move, but it looks too dangerous for me.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, but as before, Carlsen is playing what the computer suggests. This is the first computer choice even after one year. The computer is not afraid of weakening the kingside if it doesn’t see a concrete refutation.

The “human” alternative was 17...♗d6, trying to capture the c7–pawn. Black has to consider 18.♗h3, but in any case it would be a quieter position and White would have fewer practical problems.

18.♗e5

Here Ding spent another 6 minutes in thought, although computers give 18.♗e5 as the only move. A human needs to check what happens after the obvious 18.♗xg5.

Exercise: Why did Ding reject this capture?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: After 18.♗xg5?, Black could play 18...♗xg5 19.♕xc5 ♗xd2 20.♖fd1, and Black can't keep the extra piece, though he is fine after 20...♖xc7 21.♕a5 ♕d6! 22.♖xd2 ♖c5 23.♖xd5 ♕xd5 24.♕xa6 ♕d4. However, the intermediate move 18...b3! is much better, and after 19.♕c1 Black wins playing 19...♗xg5 20.♕xc5 ♗xd2 21.♖fd1 ♖xc7, as the white queen no longer has the a5–square.

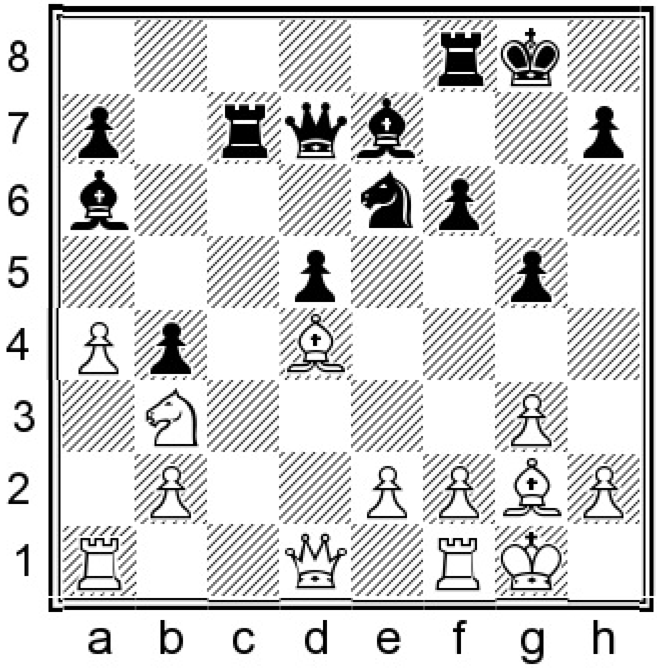
18...f6 19.♗d4 ♖xc7 20.♕d1

Carlsen later said that he was happy being still in his preparation when his opponent was not, and he believed he should be OK.

But he was forced to keep applying maximum pressure before White consolidates, because then White's position would be easier to play due to Black's weakened kingside, and also his pawn structure was weak.

20.♘b3, played three months later in Cheparinov – Deac, Douglas 2019, didn't create problems for Black after 20...♘xb3 21.♕xb3 ♗xe2 22.♗xd5+ ♔g7 23.♖fe1 ♖d8.

20...♘e6 21.♘b3



White is ready to create trouble, playing e.g. 22.♗h3, and the regrouping manoeuvre ♗e3 followed by ♘d4.

Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

21...♗c4!

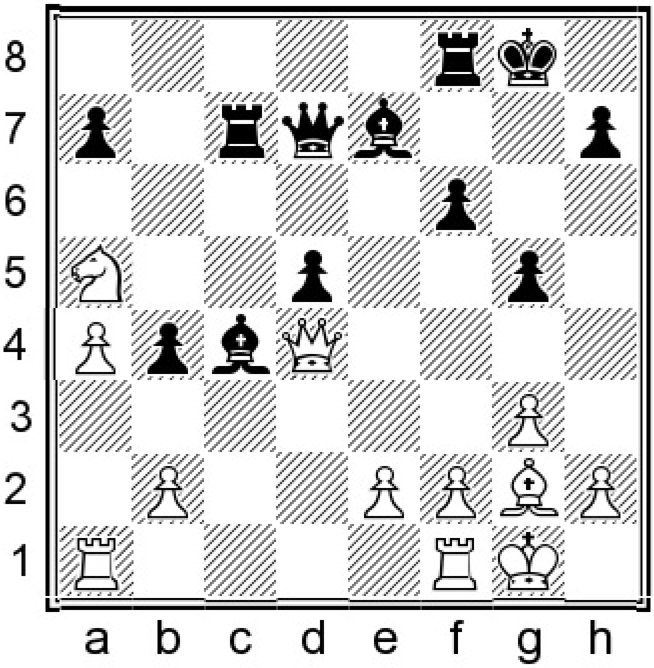
An important resource. Black threatens to win a piece with 22...♗xb3.

22.♘a5

If now 22.♗e3, then 22...d4!, temporarily sacrificing a pawn. Then after 23.♘xd4 ♘xd4 24.♗xd4 ♖d8 Black recovers the pawn with equality.

22.♗h3? loses a piece after 22...g4! 23.♗xg4 f5, closing the h3-c8 diagonal, followed by 24...♗xb3.

22...♘xd4 23.♕xd4



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

23...♔g7!

He maintained the tension. It was possible to take on e2, but White will recover the pawn on d5 and the position would be easier to play for White.

He chose to remove his king from g8, so that any future capture on d5 would happen without check. He assessed that Black's position is safe enough to move the king to g7 instead of h8. Now the king protects f6, and in the ending it will be closer to the centre.

24.♖fc1

Carlsen said after the game that he expected 24.♗f3, protecting the pawn, and that he still had to play accurately to equalize; but after this move, he felt he was better.

Objectively, 24.♗f3 was probably stronger, although after 24.♖fc1 the position is more equal than better for Black, but, again, "Chess is a state of mind".

24...♗xe2 25.♖xc7 ♕xc7 26.♖e1

The position is about equal. Black has several moves. His pieces are rather uncoordinated, but he will find a solution immediately.

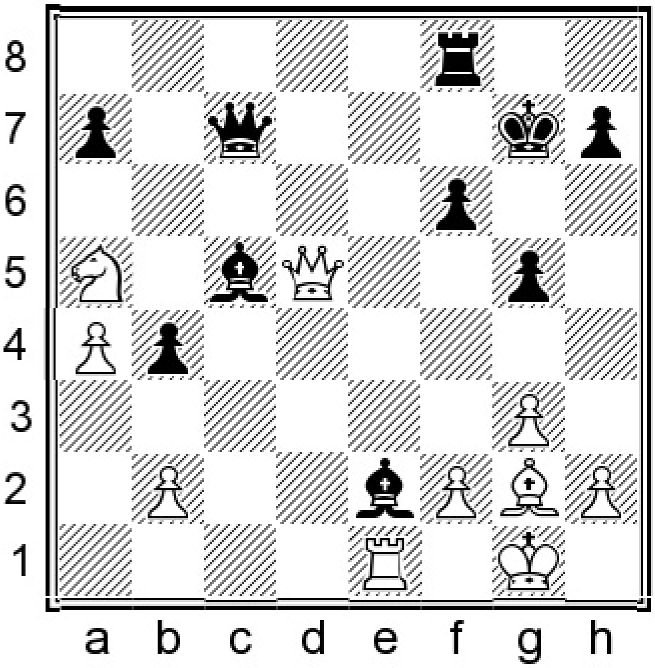
The a5-knight is temporarily far from the action, but after the capture of the d5-pawn he will get more squares to return to.

Black has the two bishops, but it's only a factor for the future, it's not relevant for now.

26...♗c5!

Black continues to maintain the tension. This is the first move to keep his pieces active and harmonise them.

27.♕xd5



Exercise: What was Carlsen’s idea?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

27...♖e8!

Magnus described his move 27...♖e8! as “important”, and it was. He said the pressure was now on White.

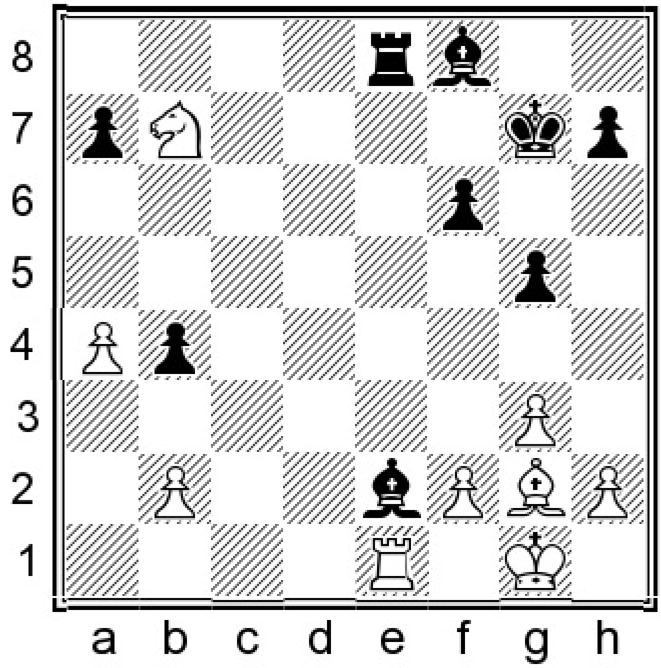
White has no way of exploiting the pin in the e-file, and Black threatens to take the knight, as well as 28.-- 28...♗f3 and also 28...♗xf2+ 29.♔xf2 ♕b6+.

Ding had reacted very well in unknown territory up till now, but the position is still complex and now he must take care of his safety.

28.♕b7?!

Exchanging queens was a logical idea, but for tactical reasons it was better to play 28.♕c6!. c6 is the best square for exchanging queens, as after 28...♕xc6 29.♘xc6 ♗h5 White has 30.♖c1!, when the knight attacks two black pawns, so he would manage to liquidate the queenside and draw. All the engines give the evaluation 0.00.

28...♕xb7 29.♘xb7 ♗f8



Now Black has good practical chances. Carlsen said that in this ending he was considerably better, but the question as to whether it was possible to win still remained to be answered.

30.♗c6?

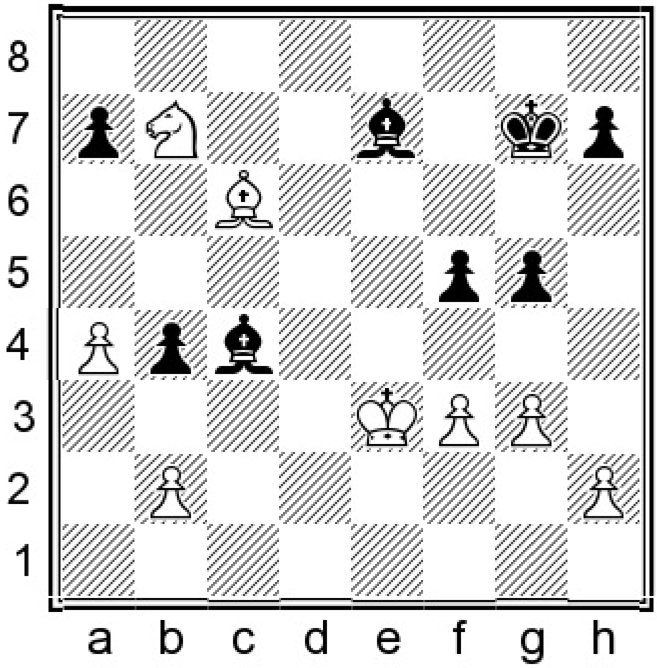
As Magnus pointed out after the game, Ding lost a great chance here with 30.♘d8!, taking advantage of the black rook being tied to the defence of the e2–bishop, and that would equalise the game.

After 30...♖xd8 31.♖xe2 ♖d1+ 32.♗f1 ♗c5 the position is still not pleasant for White, but a draw would be the most probable result after e.g. 33.♖e4 b3 34.♖c4 ♗d4 35.♖b4 ♖d2 36.♖xb3 ♗xf2+ 37.♔h1 h5. Black would be sure to continue pushing, but if White defends reasonably well, it should not be enough for the win.

30...♖e7 31.f3 ♗c4 32.♖xe7+ ♗xe7

“Black’s advantage is obvious, the bishop pair, and targets on both wings to attack. Is it enough to win? I assume it’s borderline, but to quote Larsen, practically what matters is if there are winning chances.” (Nielsen).

33.♔f2 f5 34.♔e3



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

34...♗g8!

The bishop retreats before being attacked. White threatened 35.♔d4, and the king is ready to attack the queenside pawns or play ♘a5-c4, but now that is bad due to 35...♗f6+ 36.♔c5 b3.

The two bishops begin to show their superiority, but objectively the position is still close to a draw.

35.♔d3 g4!

After 35...♗f6 36.♘d6 ♗xb2 37.♘xf5+ Black may be slightly better, but White has all his pieces working and the b-pawn can be controlled. Now, however, Black is ready to progress on the kingside, playing ...h5-h4. h2 is fixed so White must watch out for a future ...♗g1.

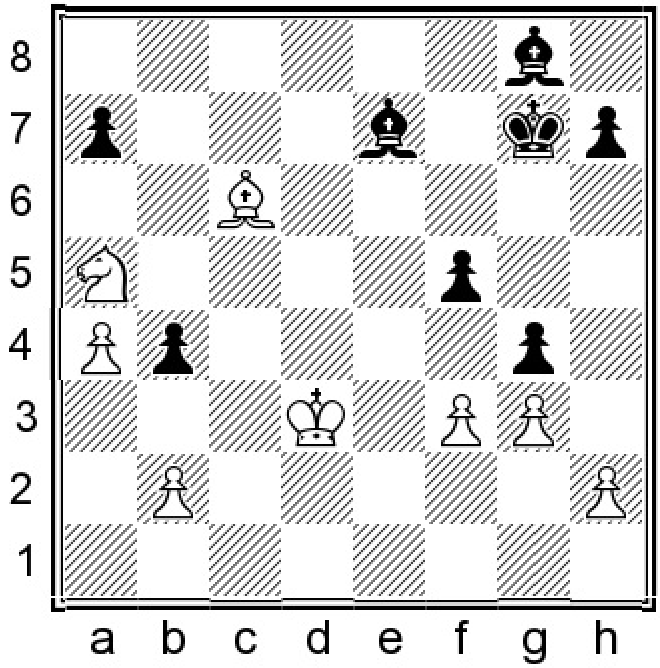
After 35...g4 "White's choice is between which kind of fortress to go for," says Nielsen. 36.f4 keeps the position closed, "but risks the bishop landing on g1, while 36.fxg4 exchanging pawns feels logical, but then leaves the black king a much easier path to the opponent's camp via the centre." (Nielsen).

36.♘a5?

A logical move as the knight wants to get back, but it is weak.

The engines are not worried by the remote position of the knight and happily play 36.a5!. After

36...h5 37.a6 the b7-knight is more stable, controlling the dark-squared bishop. Black still retains practical chances, but objectively the game should finish in a draw.



Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen reply?

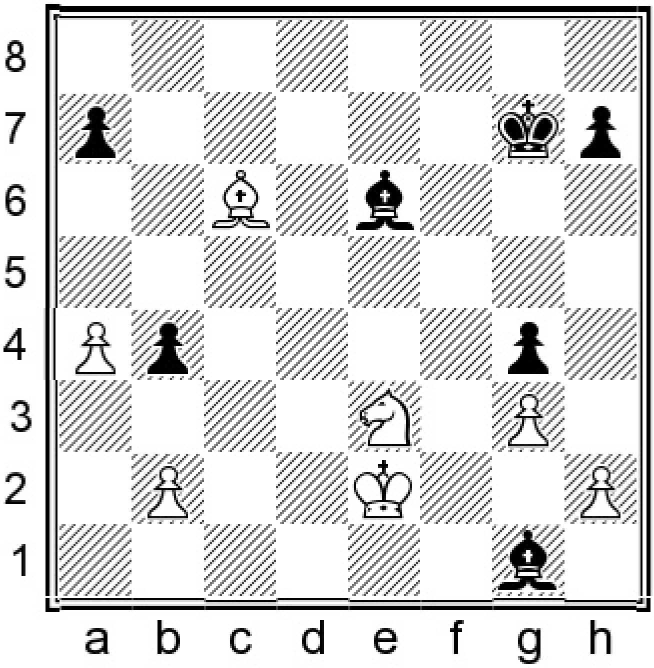
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

36...♗c5!

This is the price of regrouping the knight: it allows the bishop to penetrate.

37.♘c4 ♗g1 38.♘e3 ♗e6 39.fxg4 fxg4 40.♔e2



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

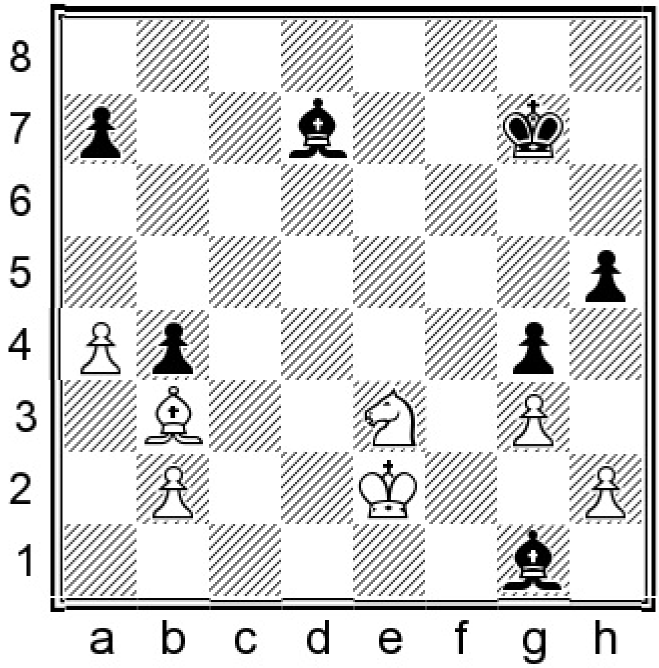
Answer:

40...h5!

It was not possible to play 40...♗xh2? because of 41.♔f2 threatening 42.♔g2 or 42.♘f1, but Black progresses raising the pressure, while White is very passive.

41.♗d5 ♗d7 42.♗b3

Magnus felt during the game that White had to play 42.b3, but it would be difficult to save the game anyway.



Exercise (easy): How did Carlsen take another step forward?

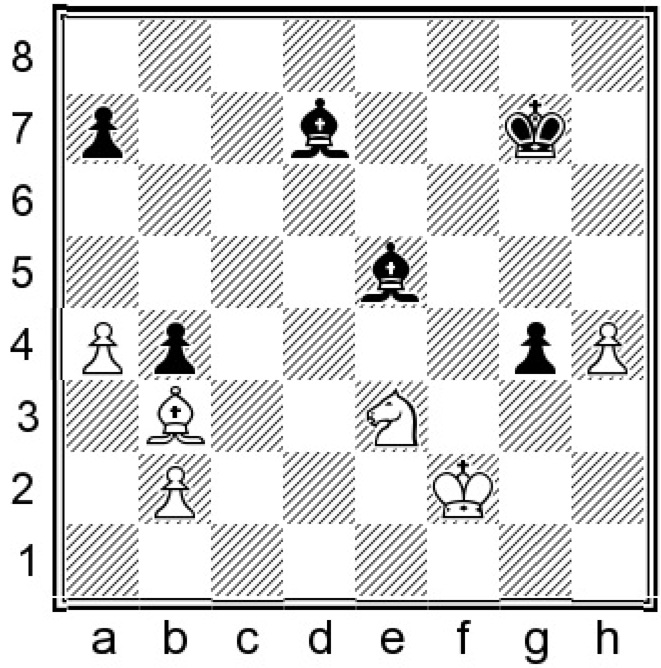
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

42...♗xh2!

Thanks to 40...h5! this move is now good.

43.♔f2 h4! 44.gxh4 ♗e5



And Black has finally got something concrete, a passed pawn.

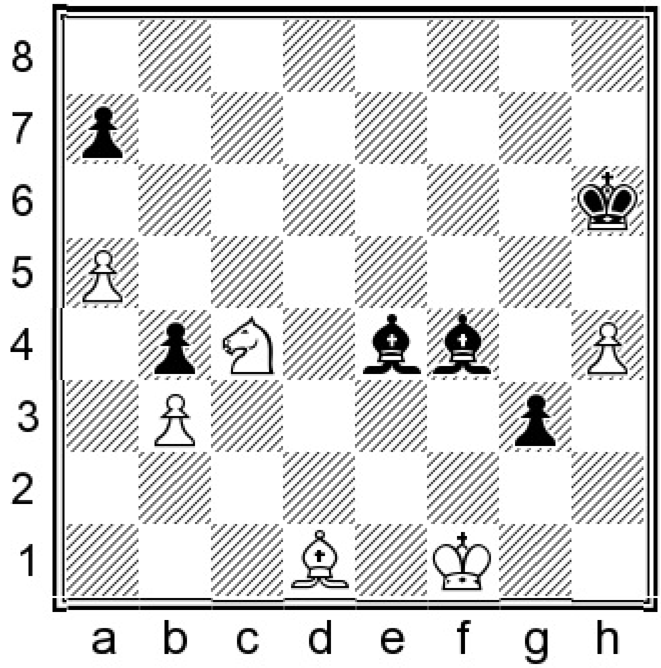
There are few pawns left, but the white pieces are tied up. They have no activity, they have to control the g-pawn and they cannot avoid the slow improvement of the black forces.

White also has a serious weakness to defend, the b-pawn.

45.♘c4 g3+ 46.♔g1 ♗f4

Controlling the white knight. White has to wait passively.

47.♗d1 ♗c6 48.b3 ♔h6 49.a5 ♗e4 50.♔f1



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

50...♔g7

The game is decided as Black's king will easily enter White's camp; the computer says 50...g2+ was quicker, but there is no harm in playing the "human" move, following the principle "Don't rush!"

51.♔g1 ♔f6 52.♔f1 ♔e6 53.h5 ♔d5

The b-pawn is the target.

54.a6 ♔d4 55.♗g4 ♔c3 56.♗e6

"56.♗d1 only defends very temporarily as 56...g2+ 57.♔g1 ♗d5 puts White in a complete zugzwang." (Nielsen).

56...♗c2 57.♘a5 ♗c7 58.♘b7 ♗d3+ 59.♔g1 ♗xa6

0–1

With this second win in a row with Black Carlsen took the lead in Zagreb, with three rounds to go.

This is his summary of the game and the situation in the tournament at that moment: "A win is a win, but this one obviously is special since I'd never beaten Ding in classical before, and with the black pieces, so I will still hold out judgment on how good the game was, but it felt like it was a pretty decent game and yeah, it's a huge win!"

Wesley So was just half a point behind. As Magnus put it: "It's still a very close race, since Wesley... You'd sort of expect to be dominating with +4 after 8 rounds, but he's right in it, and I think I'm Black against him in a couple of days, so it's by no means over, but I couldn't hope for anything better!" [That game ended in a draw, Carlsen scored two points out of three in the last rounds and he finished clear first.]

"Playing these two black games in a row against two of the leaders I thought it was going to be tough, so to get two points out of those games is an absolute dream... Today again I was lucky to use an interesting opening idea and then he had to spend a lot of time to solve that, and it's not that he got a bad position, but he was always down on time and presumably he spent more energy than I did as well."

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Opening preparation at the highest level is astonishing. (11...♗a6! 17...g5!).

2.) “Chess is a state of mind”. In complex positions, where at the board it is very difficult to know what is happening, sometimes objective evaluation is only a part of the game, and attitude is equally or more important.

3.) Preventing or minimizing the opponent’s activity can be as important as activating one’s own forces. (21...♗c4! 23...♔g7! 34...♗g8!).

4.) “Which piece should I exchange? Which one should I keep?” If you can find the right answers, you’ll probably discover the correct plan. (*28.♕c6! 30.♘d8!*).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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Game 29

Maxime Vachier-Lagrave – Magnus Carlsen

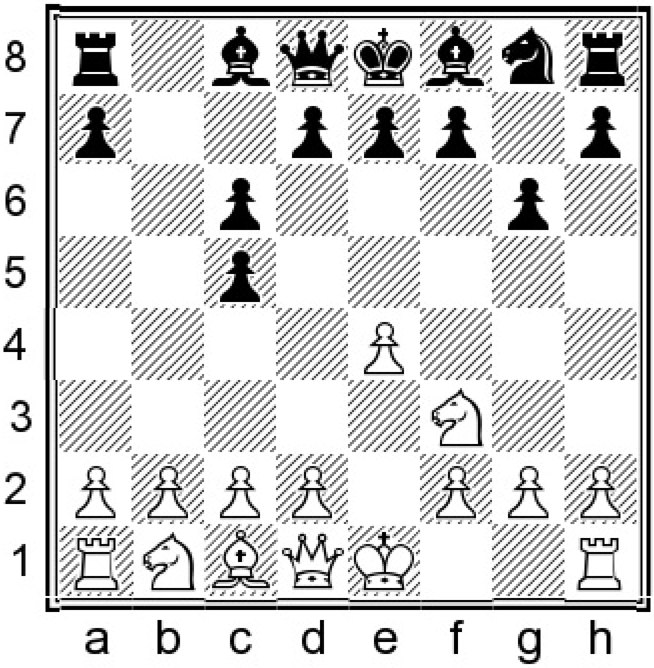
Sicilian Defence [B31]

Sinquefield Cup, Saint Louis (11), 28.08.2019

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5

No Sveshnikov this time. Carlsen faced the Rossolimo no fewer than four times in this tournament.

3...g6 4.♗xc6 bxc6



Question: This is not the usual continuation Carlsen plays, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Right, he plays 4...dxc6 much more frequently. That move is also more deeply analysed, as it is considered a more solid reply. He also chose 4...bxc6 against Anand in the second round of the same tournament.

Carlsen, surprisingly, started the tournament with nine draws, and at that point he shared 5th to 7th place, having a full point less than the leaders Ding Liren and Nepomniachtchi, and half a point less than Anand and Karjakin, hence his chances of competing for first place seemed almost non-existent.

But in the 10th round he won against Wesley So (Game 31 from the first volume), and before the eleventh and last round Anand, Karjakin, Nepomniachtchi and Carlsen had 5.5 points, and Ding had 6.

So Carlsen unexpectedly had chances to win the tournament. Of course he needed a victory with the black pieces this time round, not an easy job, but MVL also needed a win, so both players had to play ambitiously.

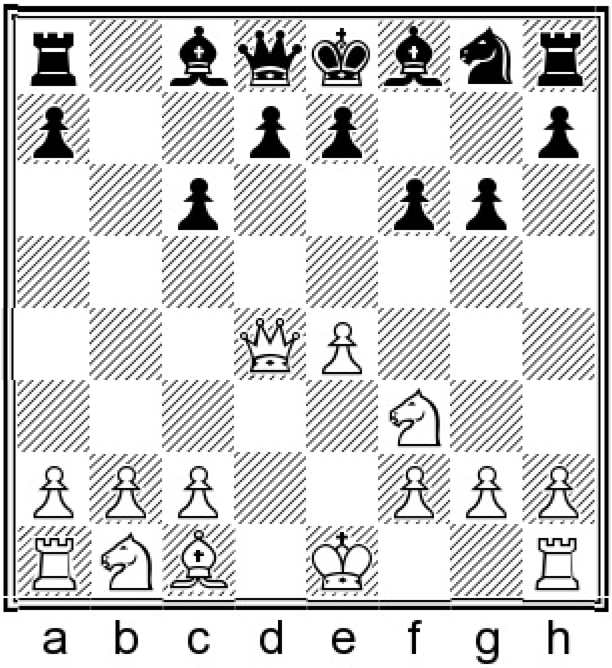
5.d4

Anand also played this move, instead of the quieter choice 5.0-0.

5...cxd4

Carlsen played 5...♗g7 against Anand. White was slightly better after 6.dxc5 ♕a5+ 7.♘bd2 ♕xc5 8.0-0 d6 9.♖e1 f6, followed by ...♘h6. Here he changed the move order, but they arrived at a similar structure.

6.♕xd4 f6



Question: What an ugly structure! Black has only moved pawns. Is it any good?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Ugly is not necessarily bad, as we know, and yes, Black is behind in development, but that is not so important because White has no way to take advantage of it: the position is not open.

Black's structure is also very flexible. It can change, and he has the two bishops, so the future looks promising if nothing critical happens in the next moves.

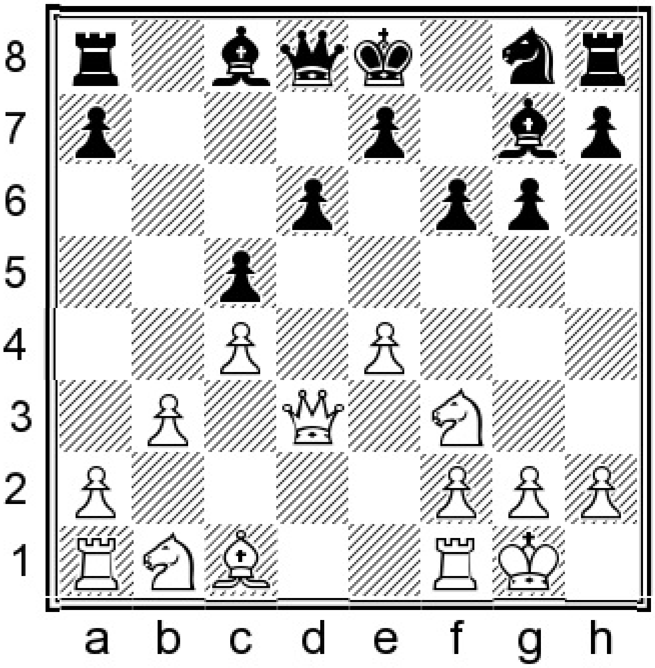
7.0-0

MVL played 7.♕a4 one month later, preparing the Maroczy Bind but with the queen on a4, and after 7...♗g7 8.0-0 ♘h6 9.c4 ♕b6 10.♘c3 0-0 11.♖e1 ♘f7 12.♗e3! White was slightly better, Vachier-Lagrave – Radjabov, Khanty Mansiysk 2019.

7...d6 8.c4 c5

This was played by the Indian prodigy Praggnanandhaa at the beginning of 2019 in the B-group of Wijk aan Zee. As Nielsen pointed out, “Black has a broad stabilised centre and the two bishops, in many ways leaving the bigger burden on White, having to prove that his initiative is not only temporary.”

9.♕d3 ♗g7 10.b3



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

10...♘h6

Carlsen continued with his planned development, as against Anand.

Nielsen thought that maybe MVL (in playing 10.b3 instead of 10.♘c3) wanted to tempt Black to play

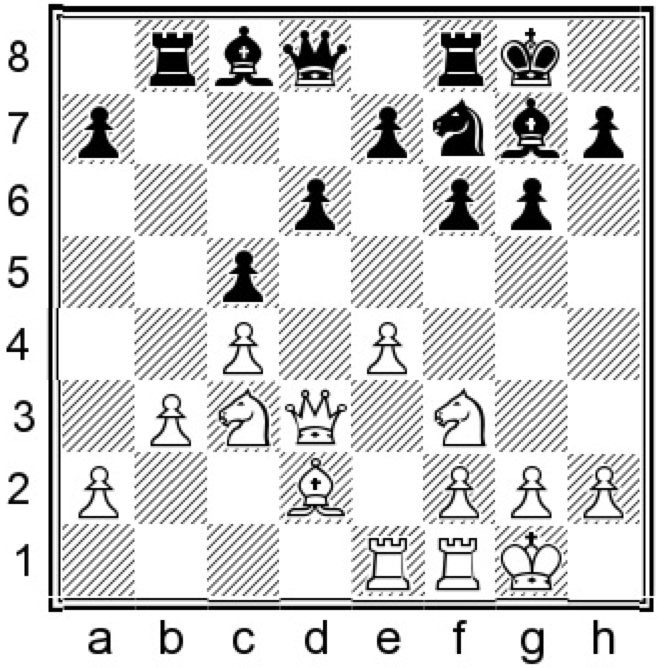
10...f5, as after 11.e5 ♗b7 12.♗b2 ♘h6 White has a slight advantage playing 13.♗c3, and can also try the pawn sacrifice 13.♘g5, aiming for the e6 square.

Carlsen considered that he wouldn’t get any advantage with premature activity, so he preferred to continue developing his pieces.

11.♘c3 ♖b8 12.♗d2

The future of this bishop on the long diagonal was not great. Black would not open the diagonal unless he got something concrete in return, and the bishop would be passive on b2, at least his future would depend on Black. Whereas from d2 the bishop helps with plans on the kingside.

12...0-0 13.♖ae1 ♘f7



14.h4?!

Question: Dubious? You just told me White wants to play on the kingside.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, the idea was clear, but how to implement it, as we will see, was not.

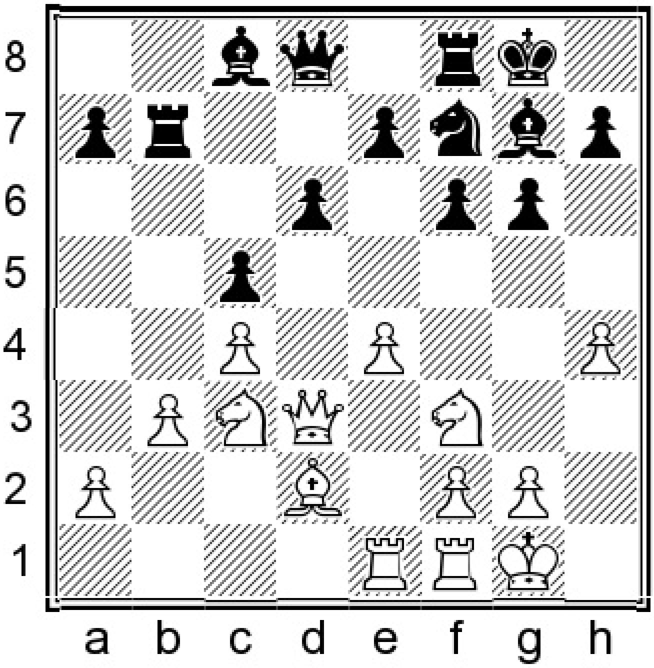
Curiously, this type of advance is very common these days. Carlsen himself plays it frequently, but when he does it is almost always accurate.

Anyway, this is what Carlsen said: “I was sort of happy to see this h4, h5 stuff, because I didn’t think it was very good, to be honest! I thought he should aim for f4 instead, but then somehow it felt like it got very complicated.”

The engines agree with what the world champion believed during the game. They prefer 14.♘h4, preparing 15.f4, when Black would probably answer 14...♘e5, to place the knight on d4 via c6. This would be consistent with 8...c5.

It was also possible, but more passive, to play 14...e6 planning to answer f4 with the thematic advance ...f5. However, it looks less convincing, because the black pawn structure seems rather weak.

14...♖b7!



Question: This move looks odd to me too. Why is the world champion “fianchettoing” his rook?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: You are not alone here. The engines and even strong grandmasters didn’t rank this as their first choice.

Dvoretsky published a chapter on “mysterious rook moves”. This move could belong to the same category. It is a flexible move, and it will take time to see its virtues, but later Carlsen will fully justify his decision to put the rook on the second row.

15.h5 g5

Instead of accepting a weakness on g6 after hxg6, Black creates a potential white weakness on h5.

16.♘h2

A logical move. White wants to continue with his offensive on the kingside (initiated with 14.h4) playing f4, but the opening of the position will not be worse for Black than for White.

The best engines prefer 16.♘e2, rerouting the knight to the f5 square, but the position remains balanced. Black has several options. He could play ...e6 at some point, covering the f5 square, but maybe Carlsen would prefer not to weaken his structure and instead play 16...a5. Nielsen also mentioned 16...♗e6 and the useful waiting move 16...♔h8.

16...♘e5

Allowing this is another obvious drawback of 16.♘h2, but MVL naturally thought it was not so important.

17.♕g3 ♔h8 18.f4

"With hindsight this is easy to criticize based on the result, but MVL is just consistently following his planned concept." (Nielsen).

18...gxf4 19.♗xf4 ♖g8 20.♖e3 ♘c6

After four consecutive moves applauded by the engines, Carlsen prefers to prepare a timely ...f5, and also the knight can move to the attractive square d4.

The computers prefer to maintain the knight near the kingside, playing 20...♕f8. One line suggested is 21.♕h4 ♗h6 22.♖g3 ♗xf4 23.♖xg8+ ♔xg8 24.♕xf4 ♘f7, followed by ...♕h6 or ...♕g7 and ...♕g5. Black has no problems, but he is not better either.

21.♕f2

Black was threatening 21...e5.

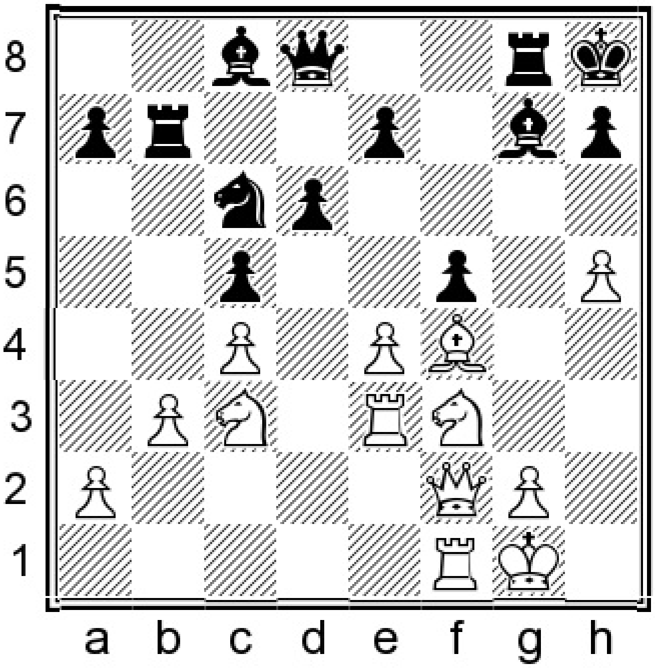
21...f5

Carlsen said: "I wasn't so happy to play it but I didn't see anything else to do."

White could answer 22.exf5, when Svidler commented that, "your pieces start breathing a lot better." Black could then win an exchange playing 22...♗d4. Carlsen mentioned it, and during the game he was ready to play it: "It felt like I should be better but it's a mess," he said, although objectively after 23.♘e2 ♗xe3 24.♗xe3 White gets sufficient compensation.

The engines believe that White is doing fine after 22.exf5 ♗xf5 23.♖g3, as 23...♗d4 is now parried by 24.♗e3, while if 23...♕e8 White can answer 24.♘e2, sacrificing a pawn after 24...♕xh5 25.♖g5 ♕f7 26.♗e3, with sufficient compensation for the material and equal chances.

22.♘f3?



White had 1 hour and 32 minutes on the clock. He played this move after just 1 minute and 50 seconds.

Question: I don’t understand. The position is complex. Why didn’t he think more before moving?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: It seems we could repeat the phrase you are familiar with. Nielsen spoke with Vachier-Lagrave just after the game and MVL said he thought that his position was already very bad at this moment. Nielsen wrote: “It is easy to understand why one would think so, Black’s position has enormous potential and the pieces are about to spring to life.”

He added an important factor: these non-standard positions are much more difficult to play, even for very strong players, as it is not possible to rely on experience.

Carlsen said about 22.♘f3: “I couldn’t believe my eyes”.

Exercise: How did Carlsen exploit Black’s error?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

22...♗xc3!

Carlsen said “Obviously his trick was 22...♗d4 23.e5 and trying to set up a blockade,” but he chose to exchange his strong bishop for a passive knight. Of course, there is a reason behind it, as we will see.

23.♖xc3

Exercise: How did Carlsen's idea continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

23...e5!

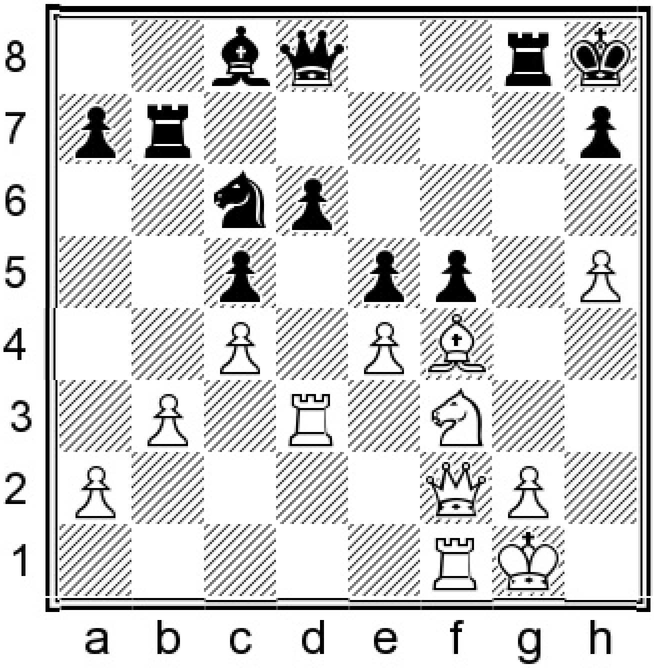
This was the idea. After ...e5 and ...f4 the g7-bishop would be locked in behind its own pawns, but now the position after 24.♗c1 (or 24.♗h2) 24...f4 was evaluated as strategically winning by Carlsen: "He has no chance whatsoever."

Black would double his rooks on the g-file, play ...♗g4, the knight is coming to d4, and so on.

This was a nightmare, so White tried to complicate the position.

And note now, especially after 23...e5, just how useful 14...♖b7 was.

24.♖d3



Carlsen admitted he had missed the amazing try 24.♖d3.

He was asked what his heart was telling him at this point. He answered: "It's telling me, it wasn't as easy as you thought! I always presume that my opponents have missed things, and they haven't always. I felt intuitively that I must be much better, I just had to find the precise way, and I thought for a long time."

Exercise: How did he reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

24...exf4!

“But fortunately, I have enough after 24...exf4,” said Carlsen. He also looked at 24...♕f8, evading the pin, which is also good, but the text is even better.

Of course, to accept the sacrifice at first sight looks dangerous. White’s king is safe and Black’s less so, but he analysed the coming complications correctly.

25.♕b2+ ♖bg7

Now we see, again, one of the virtues of 14...♖b7.

Was it calculated? Of course not, but the world champion “felt” that the rook would be helpful on the second rank.

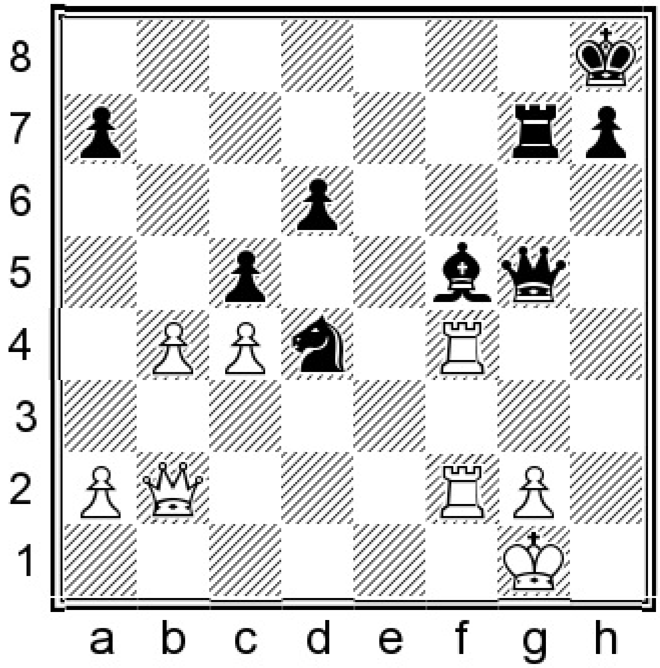
26.h6 fxe4 27.♖d2

Black gains a decisive material advantage after 27.hxg7+ ♖xg7 28.♘e5 playing the obvious 28...♘xe5 29.♕xe5 exd3.

27...exf3 28.hxg7+ ♖xg7 29.♖xf3 ♕g5

Magnus has two minor pieces for the rook, good squares for his pieces and can defend his king taking care of any white threats, so the result should be clear. But, naturally, White will continue to try and complicate matters.

30.♖df2 ♘d4 31.♖xf4 ♗f5 32.b4



Exercise: How did Carlsen reinforce his defences?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

32...♗e6!

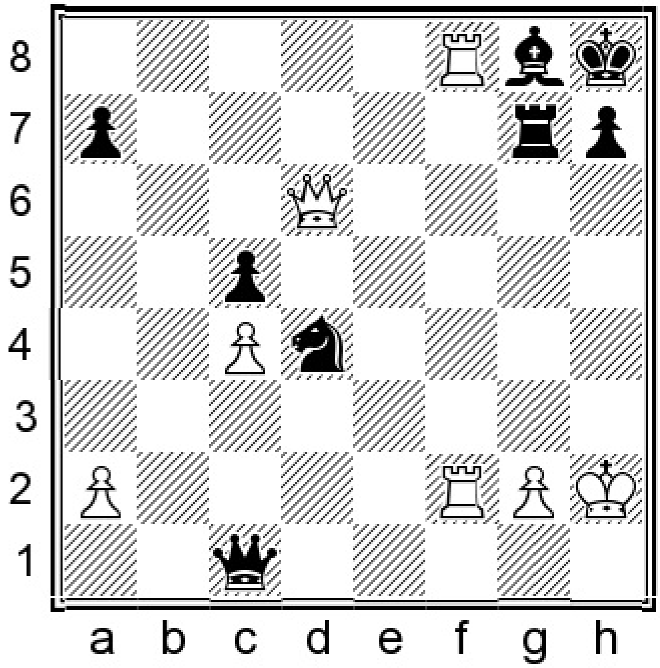
“There’s no way really for me to spoil the position except allowing perpetual, and if I’m a little bit careful I don’t do that.” (Carlsen).

To avoid a perpetual, he rerouted the bishop to control the g8 square, safeguarding his king.

33.♖f8+ ♗g8 34.bxc5 dxc5 35.♕b8 ♕e3 36.♕d6

Threatening 36...-- 37.♖xg8+ ♖xg8 38.♕f6+ with a perpetual.

36...♕c1+ 37.♔h2



Exercise: How did Carlsen reply?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

37...♕g5!

The safest move, controlling e5 and creating difficulties for the white king.

It was also possible to play 37...♕xc4. White could try to complicate the position with 38.♖e8, planning 39.♖ff8 or 39.♕e5, but what Carlsen played is stronger.

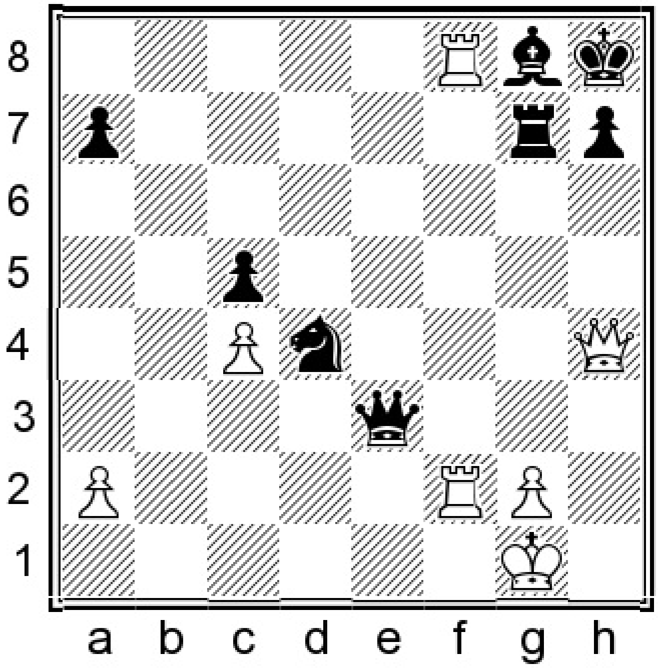
38.♕d5

Now 38.♖e8? receives mate in three moves after 38...♘f3+!.

38...♕h4+ 39.♔g1 ♕e7

Controlling e5 again, and also creating threats against the white king.

40.♕h5 ♕e3 41.♕h4



Black has several winning continuations; he played the fastest.

Exercise: How did Carlsen finish off the game?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

41...♘e2+!

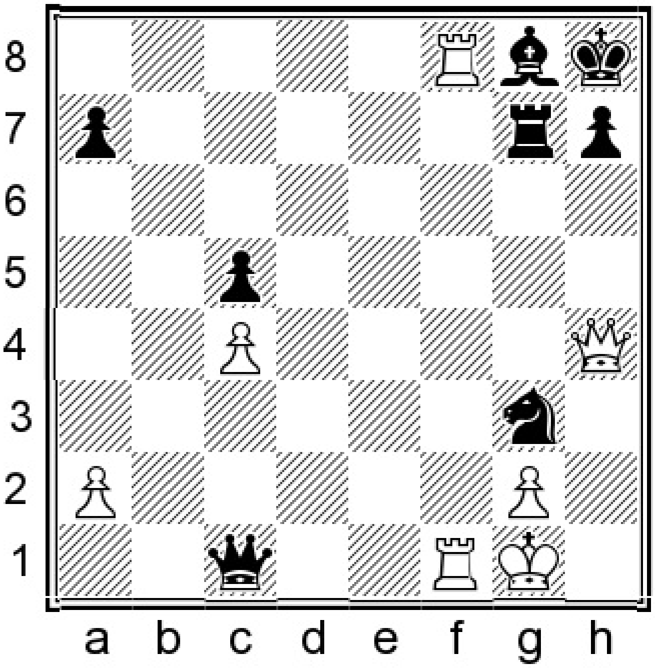
This move begins a series of forcing moves leading to an easy win.

42.♔h1

After 42.♔h2 ♕e5+ White has to play 43.g3, with a lost position after 43...♘xg3.

42...♕c1+ 43.♖f1 ♘g3+ 44.♔g1

If 44.♕xg3 there is 44...♕xf1+ before taking the white queen.



44...♕e3+

Winning the exchange, because after 45.♖1f2 ♕e1+ 46.♖f1 Black has 46...♘e2+! and mate.

0–1

This victory gave Magnus what just two days earlier seemed a completely improbable result: he shared first place in the tournament with Ding Liren.

"I made my own luck in the last two rounds...I have to say I didn't believe it one bit before today and especially before yesterday," said Carlsen. "Today I knew I had a chance. Obviously when we got this very complicated strategic position from the opening then I'm starting to think: well, I have some hope but still it's a bit surreal. Now I have to get back to earth because there's more chess to play tomorrow." (Ding Liren won the playoff).

Carlsen got a good position after the opening. The best French player played aggressively, but Carlsen defended very well.

MVL lost faith in his position too early. He played his moves very quickly, applying pressure on the clock, but at some moment cracked when he took less than two minutes to commit a positional blunder; after that, Carlsen didn't give him the slightest chance to save the game.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Always ask yourself "What is my opponent planning?" or "what defence does he have?" (14.h4? *14.♘h4!* 22.♘f3? *22.exf5!* 32...♗e6!).

2.) "What's important is the pieces that remain on the board, not the pieces that are exchanged." (Tarrasch). (22...♗xc3!).

3.) General considerations are not as important as concrete analysis at critical points. (24...exf4!).

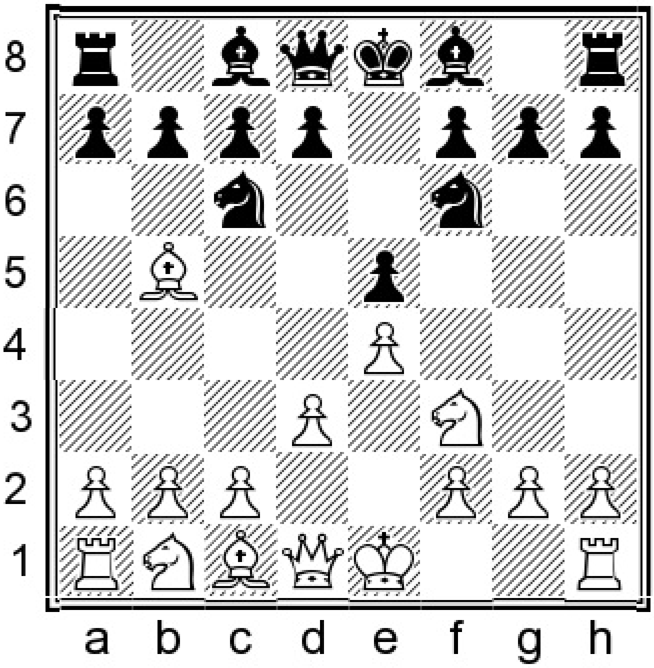
4.) Once more, “Chess is a state of mind.” (22.♘f3?).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 30
Alireza Firouzja – Magnus Carlsen
Ruy Lopez Berlin Variation [C65]

Tata Steel Wijk aan Zee (9), 21.01.2020

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 ♘f6 4.d3



Carlsen is more frequently seen playing White in this position. Anyway, he was happy to see 4.d3, getting a position where not much would be decided in the early phase.

Playing the Berlin endgame after 4.0-0 ♘xe4 5.d4 ♘d6 6.♗xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♘f5 or 5.♖e1 ♘d6 6.♘xe5 would have been very different.

4...d6

Question: Why not 4...♗c5? It is more popular, isn’t it?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes, it is the main line these days, and Carlsen plays it more frequently, but it is simply a matter of taste.

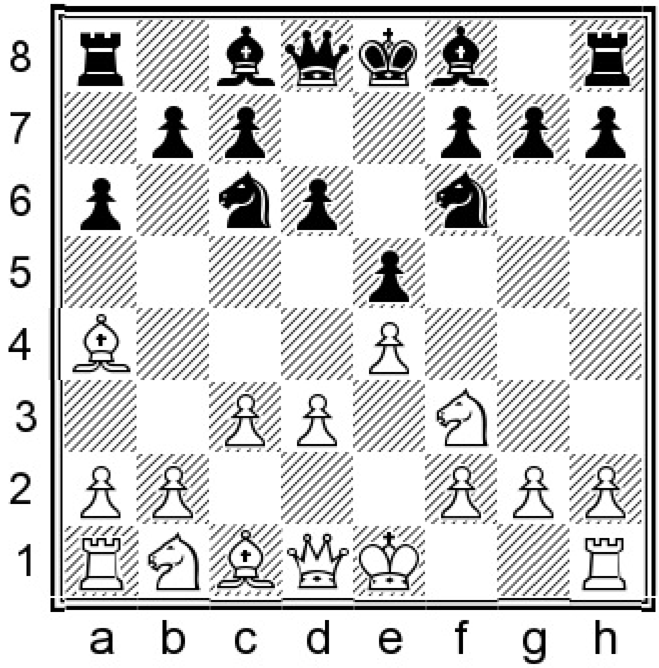
“The ‘Steinitz-lovers’ (like me) prefer the more solid text-move. According to my taste, the dark-squared bishop belongs on either e7 or g7 in the Ruy Lopez,” wrote Lajos Portisch in *My Secrets in the*

Ruy Lopez.

5.c3

Firouzja played 5.c4 against Fedoseev in Moscow 2019 at the World Blitz, but here he plays the main line.

5...a6 6.♗a4



Question: I guess 6.♗xc6+ was an option, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: In a similar position, in the Steinitz Defence Deferred, White can play ♗xc6 after 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 3...a6 4.♗a4 d6 5.♗xc6+.

Here it appears that White has gained a tempo. However, as Peter Svidler explained: “It’s very important for White in the structure to develop his knight to c3 before playing d4. So ♗xc6 is not really an option.”

6...♗e7 7.0-0 0-0 8.♖e1

8.♘bd2 is one alternative. Both sides have several options on each move, and transpositions are frequent; in fact, after a Berlin we have transposed to a Ruy Lopez early d3 variation.

8...♖e8

Carlsen plays this flexible move these days. Ivanchuk – Carlsen, Medias 2011, continued 8...b5

9.♗c2 d5 10.♘bd2 dxe4 11.dxe4 ♗e6 12.♗b3 ♗xb3 13.axb3 ♕d3, and Black was fine.

9.♘bd2 ♗f8 10.h3

Both players played the same position in an online tournament later in 2020, Firouzja – Carlsen, chess24.com INT 2020, continued 10.♘f1 h6 (varying from the typical continuation 10...b5 11.♗b3 ♘a5 12.♗c2 c5, played in Anand – Carlsen, Moscow 2013) 11.♘g3 b5 12.♗b3 (12.♗c2 is met by 12...d5), and now, instead of 12...♘a5, Carlsen chose 12...♗e6 13.♗c2 d5 14.exd5 ♗xd5 15.♕e2 g6 16.h3 ♗g7, with a good position.

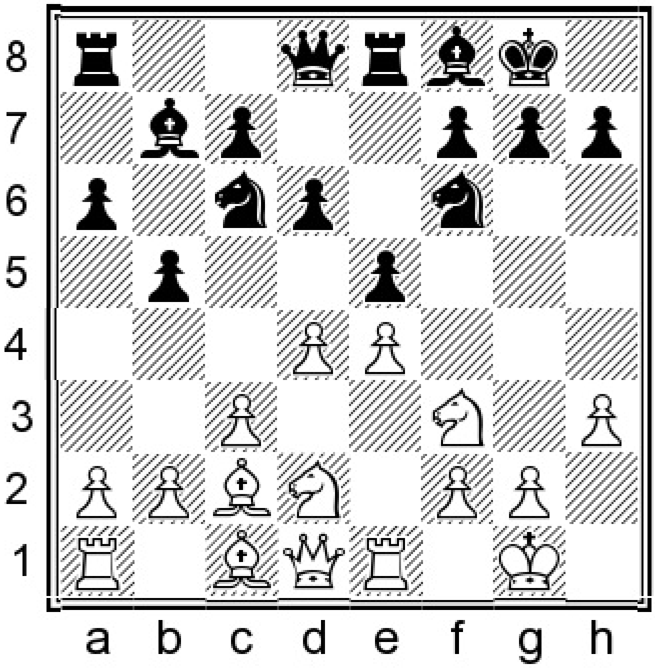
During those months Carlsen also faced 10.d4, and after 10...b5 11.♗c2, instead of 11...exd4 12.cxd4 ♗g4 13.h3 ♗h5 14.g4 ♘xg4 (or 14...♗g6), he preferred 11...♗b7 in Svidler – Carlsen, chess24.com INT 2020.

10...b5 11.♗c2

The bishop moves immediately to c2. 11.♗b3 would allow the typical manoeuvre 11...♘a5 followed by 12...c5.

However, we cannot say that White has "won" a tempo. It is just a different position, because Black will not play ...♘a5, and will try to take advantage of the fact that the bishop is not on the a2-g8 diagonal hitting f7.

11...♗b7 12.d4



12...g6

Question: This position looks familiar to me, but I recall that Black usually plays 12...h6 in these positions, right?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Yes and no. After 12...h6 13.a4, a famous position from the Kasparov – Karpov matches would arise by transposition.

White played d4 in 2 moves, but ♗c2 was played in one move instead of ♗b3–c2.

As we mentioned, in “normal positions” (with the bishop on b3) the move ...h6 is necessary, because there is the threat of ♘g5, but here, with the bishop on c2, there is no such threat, so Carlsen makes a more useful move.

Question: But isn’t it more useful to play the immediate 12...♘b8 followed by ...♘bd7? Carlsen plays this Breyer manoeuvre quite often.

Show/Hide Solution

Answer: Carlsen delayed his favourite manoeuvre so as to stop 13.♘f1?!, because 13...exd4 14.cxd4 ♘b4 would follow.

13.a3

This move is frequently played by Firouzja in similar positions. It not only stops the mentioned line based on ...♘b4, but also prepares b4 and then ♗b2.

The most popular continuation is 13.d5 ♘b8, and White supports his d5-pawn playing 14.b3 c6 15.c4.

13...♘b8

Carlsen transposes immediately to a Breyer/Zaitsev variation, avoiding 14.♘f1, because 14...exd4 would follow, winning a pawn. He could also play 13...♗g7.

14.d5?!

A strange combination with 13.a3. 14.b4 would be more consistent with 13.a3, when after 14...♘bd7 15.♗b2 we have a normal Breyer/Zaitsev position.

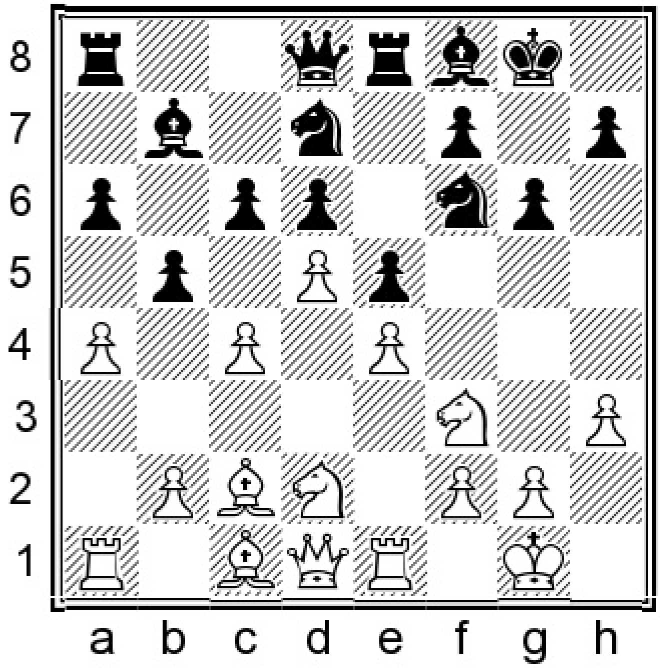
14...c6

Black immediately undermines White’s centre. Now 15.dxc6?! would admit that there was something erroneous in White’s plan.

15.c4 ♘bd7 16.a4

This is also an admission that something has gone slightly wrong, as he could have arrived at this position playing a4 with just one move, not two.

Anyway, playing with White, this tempo loss is not so terrible. It means, however, that to gain an advantage will be more difficult.



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

16...♕c7!

Preparing ...♖ec8, with X-rays on c2. Black could also play 16...bxc4, exploiting the fact that White cannot maintain a pawn on d5. After e.g. 17.dxc6 ♗xc6 18.♘xc4 ♕c7 19.♗d2 ♖ac8 Black is fine, but the world champion preferred to maintain the tension before taking more critical decisions.

17.b3

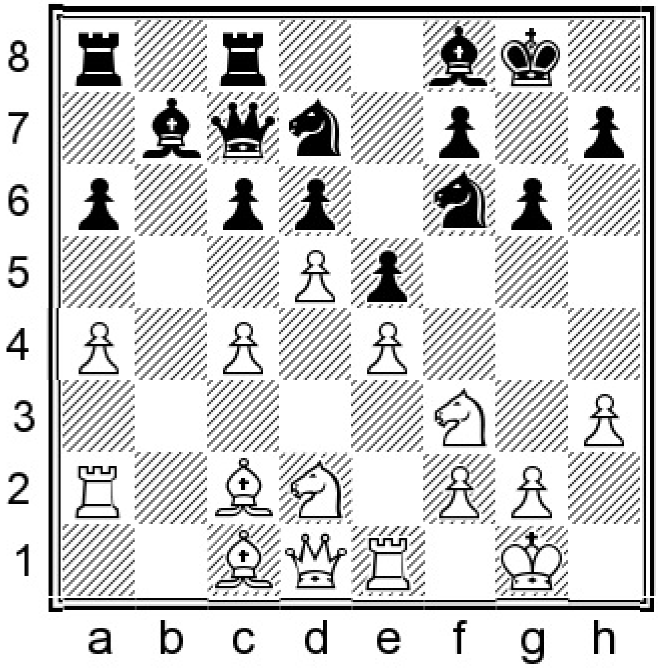
White is, naturally, still trying to get the most from his position, and he doesn't think about heading so early for safer but more passive solutions.

Svidler mentioned the continuation 17.axb5 axb5 18.♖xa8 ♖xa8 19.dxc6 ♗xc6 20.cxb5 ♗xb5 21.♘b1, where White is solid but Black is slightly better after ...♗c6 and ...♕b7.

17...♖ec8 18.♖a2

White played this unnatural move because 18.♗d3?! cxd5 19.exd5 (19.cxd5? ♕c3) 19...♗xd5! was worse.

18...bxc4 19.bxc4



Exercise: Carlsen has obtained a favourable version of the Breyer Variation. How did he improve his position?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

19...a5!

With two purposes: it stops a5 and with the idea of playing ...♗a6 later.

20.♘f1?

White plays a logical and typical move, but it is a mistake. The young Iranian didn’t sense the danger. His knight heads for e3 to reinforce the defence of the c4-pawn but it will obstruct the activity of the remaining pieces.

This was a good moment to reconsider the situation for White, and accept that he was no longer in a normal position with a slight advantage.

The “strange” move 20.♘b1! was a much better attempt. After 20...♗a6 he would play 21.♘a3, trying to get the knight to b5 from where it would put up resistance to Black's progress on the queenside.

20...♗a6! 21.♘e3 ♘c5

Black continues with the same manoeuvring approach. It was also possible to play 21...cxd5, but Black doesn't fear 22.dxc6.

22.♘d2

White's position is also unpleasant after 22.dxc6 ♕xc6 23.♘d5 ♘cd7 24.♘d2 ♖ab8!, increasing the pressure, rather than 24...♗xc4? 25.♘xc4 ♕xc4 26.♗b3, with decent compensation for the pawn.

22...cxd5

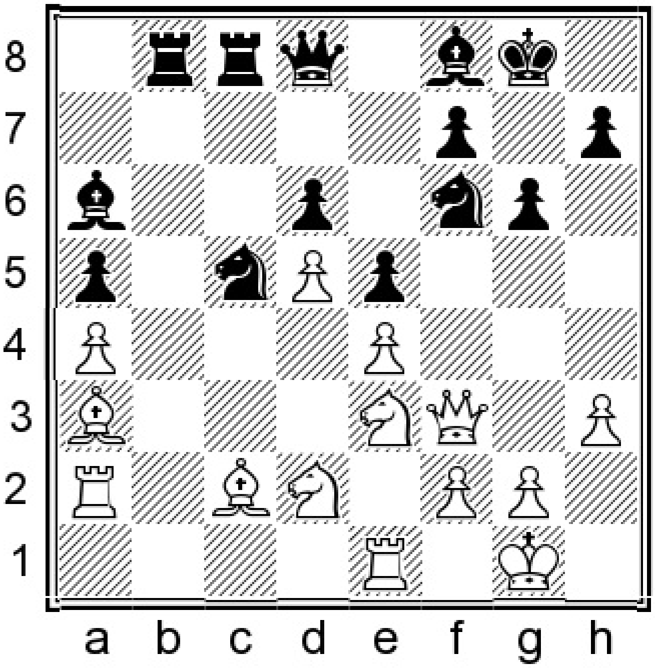
Black has no more preparatory or simply useful moves.

23.cxd5 ♖ab8 24.♗a3 ♕d8

"A good move, also for illustrative purposes, as Magnus retreats his queen to the back rank but clears the c-file for his rook." (Nielsen).

25.♕f3

Black is progressing. Almost all his pieces are in ideal positions, but he needs more.



Exercise: How did Carlsen increase the pressure?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

25...h5!

This prepares the activation of his only passive piece, the bishop, to its best place, preventing a possible ♘g4.

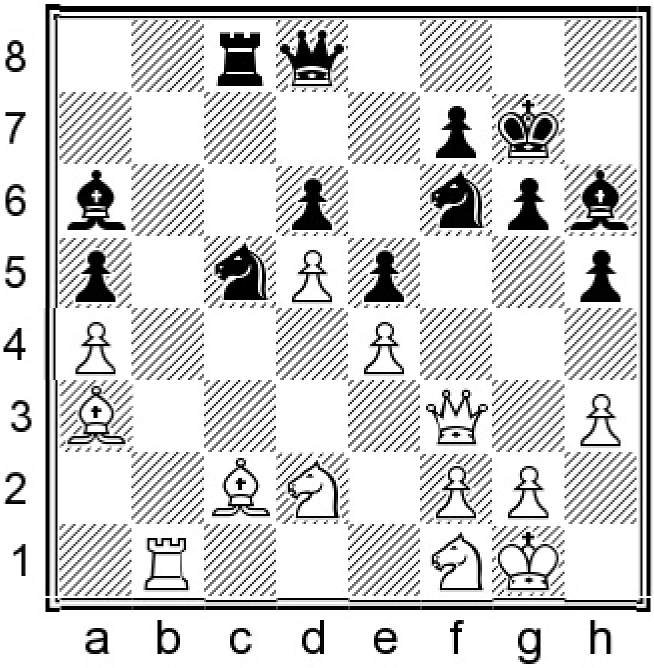
26.♖aa1 ♗h6

Both Black’s bishops are now very active and dominate White’s centre.

27.♖ab1 ♖xb1 28.♖xb1 ♔g7!

A good preparatory move. The king gives more protection to the f6-knight, freeing up the queen.

29.♘ef1



Exercise: And now, how did Carlsen gain more terrain?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

29...h4!

The bishop gets a good post on f4.

It’s amazing how Black, without making direct threats, keeps improving his position, while White cannot create counterplay, because his pieces are not well coordinated. Active moves will lead to material loss and he can only wait.

30.♘e3 ♗f4 31.♘ef1 ♕c7

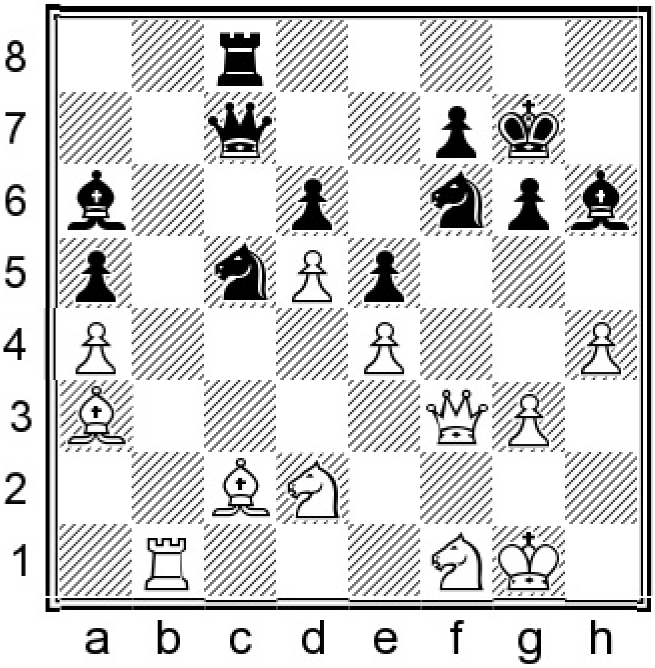
It’s time to reintegrate the queen into the offensive, with ideas like ...♘cd7 and penetrating with the queen down the c-file, or in some lines with ...♕a7.

32.g3?!

Alireza had a difficult position and was also in time trouble. This move only weakens his position. It is easy to criticize it, but it is almost impossible to give good advice now.

“32.♘e3 staying loyal to the back and forth concept could have led to this beautiful line: 32...♘cd7 33.♖c1 ♕c3 34.♘b1 ♕a1! when White is completely dominated and loses material!” (Nielsen). If 35.♗xd6 Black replies 35...♗d3.

32...hxg3 33.fxg3 ♗h6 34.h4



After the change of structure on the kingside White’s king is also more vulnerable.

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

34...♕d7!

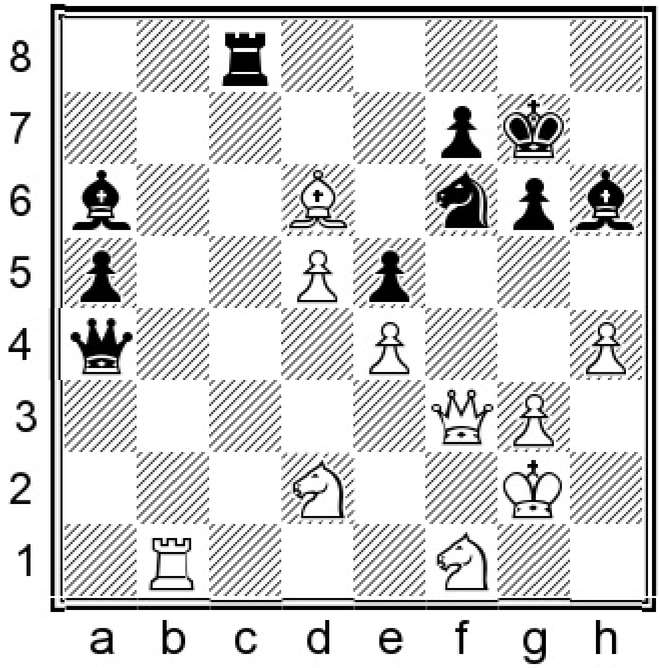
Continuing with quiet but lethal advances. This strong move targets a4. The opening of the position will favour Black as he has more active pieces.

Black could also take advantage of the weakening of White’s position, not only the kingside but also in the centre, playing the strong sequence 34...♕a7! 35.♔h1 ♘cd7!, and the black queen penetrates decisively on d4 after 36.♗b3 or 36.♗d1, or on f2 after 36.♕d1, while if 36.♗d3 then 36...♖c3.

35.♔g2 ♘xa4 36.♗xa4

Not surprisingly, the complications after 36.♗xd6 favour Black. It is possible to take on c2, but the simple 36...♕xd6 37.♗xa4 ♗xf1+ 38.♘xf1 ♖c4 is also strong, and White’s position collapses.

36...♕xa4 37.♗xd6



Exercise: What did Carlsen play here?

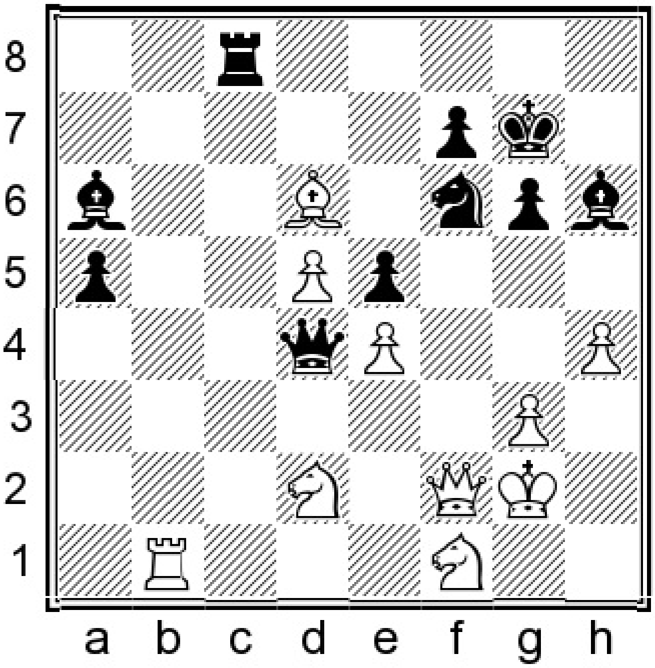
Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

37...♕d4!

This strong centralization defends e5 and attacks the hanging knight on d2, so 38...♖c2 and 38...♖c3 are also threats.

38.♕f2



Exercise: Black has a winning advantage. How did Carlsen continue?

Show/Hide Solution

Answer:

38...♕xf2+

This move wins, so it is a good practical decision.

Nonetheless, 38...♕c3! was quicker, threatening 39...♗d3, 39...♘g4, etc.. White is almost in zugzwang. If 39.♔h3 the most beautiful response is 39...♖e8!, defending e5, with the idea of playing 40.-- 40...♘g4! 41.♔xg4 ♗c8+.

39.♔xf2 ♗xf1

And here Alireza, being lost and very short of time, resigned. 40.♘xf1 ♘xe4+ loses, but he could still fight after 40.♔xf1 ♗xd2 41.♗xe5 ♗c3 42.♖c1! ♗xe5 43.♖xc8; here both 43...♘xe4 and 43...♗xg3 are winning, but the game would continue.

0–1

Carlsen positionally outplayed his young opponent, who had recorded an excellent start to the tournament.

Carlsen was satisfied with the opening played. In his words, he liked “...to get some position with a bunch of pieces on the board.”

“I got a nice, playable position early on and it felt like it was easier for me to play,” said Carlsen. “It felt like he was drifting, sort of. He couldn’t really find a plan there.”

Nielsen pointed out that there were no tactical complications during the entire game. Black gradually strengthened his position, raising the pressure until his opponent collapsed.

“A great strategical game by Magnus,” he summarized.

SOME LESSONS FROM THIS GAME: *

1.) Always ask yourself “What is my opponent planning?” or “what defence does he have?” (19...a5! 20.♘f1?).

2.) Be careful with seemingly “automatic” moves. (20.♘f1? *20.♘b1!*).

3.) “How can I improve the position of my pieces?” A question that, posed at the right moment, can give us clues to finding the best moves. Carlsen did this admirably almost throughout the game. (19...a5! 25...h5! 28...♔g7!).

4.) “Chess is a team game,” i.e. all the pieces should work together. (16...♕c7! 20...♗a6! 24...♕d8! 26...♗h6! 29...h4! 31...♕c7!).

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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